



MARTEEKA KARLAND

CYRUS

IRON TZARS MC #8

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Cyrus (Iron Tzars MC 8)

A Bones MC Romance

Marteeka Karland

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Odette — My life has gone down the toilet. I accidentally got myself involved with a married man and had an... accident. Don't get me wrong, I didn't love the cheating bastard, but I hate that I got played. Naturally I did what any self-respecting eighteen year old would do. I went to a karaoke bar and got wasted. Not my finest moment. So, when I land in the arms of a man I've fantasized over for the past two years, I'm not even surprised. My luck is just that bad.

Cyrus — The first time I met Odette she was only sixteen and already more trouble than I knew what to do with. She'd been about to make a mistake with a prospect from her brother's club when I intervened. The next time I see her, two years later, she's singing like an angel, drunk off her ass. I have to get her out of that bar. Taking her home with me to our club doctor feels like the right thing to do. Deciding she's mine to care for and protect might make me a possessive bastard, but I don't like the word *no* so I'm not giving her the chance to object.

Chapter One

Cyrus

“I can’t understand why this amuses you.” I was sitting with Blaze and Wylde in a bar a couple towns over from Evansville. It was karaoke night. Which was basically grown men and women, drunk off their ass, singing off-key and off-beat. Some people laughed, others whooped and clapped. I was at a complete loss as to what to do. Though, I now understood why people drank. If I did, I’d be drinking now. Heavily.

“It’s laughing with each other and thinking how bad that person was and that you can do better. Only to get up on stage and do just as bad or worse.” Wylde grinned at me as he explained. The bastard always loved explaining social nuances he knew I’d never get otherwise. It pissed me off sometimes because I knew he was having fun at my expense, but I was oddly grateful for the explanation. Not that I’d ever admit that. “Think of it as male bonding with both men and women.”

“Seems like it’s grown adults making fools of themselves.” I winced as someone made a particularly horrible noise from the stage.

“Exactly!” Wylde was excited, almost like a kid. This was one of his favorite things to do. He always wrangled someone to go with him so he could drink. Of all the men in Iron Tzars, Wylde puzzled me the most. He was ruthless when it came to hunting people he considered “bad guys,” but otherwise obeyed the law to the letter. I didn’t understand him.

“But that’s not why we’re here.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose with my thumb and finger. I felt a nauseating headache coming on. “Then why the fuck *are* we here?”

“Just wait. Trust me when I tell you it will be worth the wait.” Wylde actually looked gleeful. What the fuck was he up to?

“He’s been talking about this for two weeks, Cyrus.” Blaze tossed back a couple peanuts from the bucket on our table. “I’m actually anxious to find out what all the fuss is over.” Blaze signaled our server that he and Wylde needed more beer. I took another cup of coffee.

“Well, he’s got ten more minutes, then I’m outta here. You guys can either come with me or find your own Goddamned way home.”

“I’d almost forgotten what an asshole you are, Cyrus.” Wylde didn’t look mad. Strangely, he looked amused.

“Never claimed to be anything but.”

Wylde just grinned and took another pull from his beer. “You, my friend, are getting ready to be knocked on your ass.”

With a roll of my eyes, I took a sip of the coffee in front of me. How was this even my life right now? Wylde had coerced me and Blaze into coming with him. Blaze was having a blast. Wylde too, obviously. This was a special kind of hell for me. I didn’t deal with crowds on the best of days, and drunken, singing crowds made me want to run from the room screaming with my hands over my ears.

Wylde actually looked like a kid who’d been let loose

in a candy store with a hundred dollars. He was practically rubbing his hands together with glee.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Blaze said with a chuckle.

“Trust me.” Wylde grinned at the other man. “You’re gonna be glad you came.” Then he burst out laughing.

“You’re drunk.” I ground my teeth. This was yet another reason I hated coming to shit like this. The guys knew I didn’t drink and always wanted me to go because I was guaranteed to be the designated driver.

“Nah. Not this time. I’m just buzzed enough to really look forward to seeing your reaction to my little surprise.”

I turned to Blaze. “He knows I hate surprises.”

“Yep.” Though Blaze knew how fine the control on my temper was most days, he looked like he was loving the anticipation as much as Wylde was.

“I may end up killin’ you both.”

Blaze shrugged. “Some things are just worth it.”

Granted, I had trouble reading people. I never got other people’s emotions. Hell, I had trouble with my own emotions. Expressing myself was difficult on the best of days. I’d given up trying to figure out everyone else a long fucking time ago. Usually, Wylde was with me to translate when I didn’t get something so whatever he knew was getting ready to happen would likely knock me on my ass. As far as people went, Wylde and Blaze were probably the only two who understood me. They just used that knowledge to torment me sometimes. Said it was their way of showing they cared.

Whatever.

I stood and stalked to the bar as whichever poor bastard on stage tried to hit a high note in *Bohemian Rhapsody*. So help me God, if I made it out of this with my sanity intact, I was gonna kill Wylde tomorrow. I wanted him to be completely sober so he could fully appreciate the pain he was going to experience before he begged me for death.

Another cup of black coffee was set in front of me, and the bartender gave me a slight nod as he winced at the same drunk singer on stage. I'd never fully appreciated the phrase "infernal caterwauling" before until tonight.

The song ended and there was a rousing round of applause. Probably because the song was over. "Thank fucking God," I muttered into my cup as I took a sip. What I wouldn't give to be called away on a mission. Or even to weapons testing for Shadow Demons. Mindless target practice wounded like heaven.

Then the next song started and I wanted to bang my head against the bar. Of course, that was before the singer opened her mouth to belt out the lyrics to a raucous country and rock hybrid.

She was fucking *good*, her voice a strong, sultry contralto with the perfect amount of rasp. I perked up, setting down my coffee and straining to see the small figure on stage. Me and everyone else. The bar, which had been moderately sedate, seemed to come alive and spark with excitement the second the music started.

The woman on stage engaged the crowd with her presence alone. Just looking at her, one would never be able to tell she had such a big voice. Not only that, but her charisma

was off the fucking charts. She had every fucking horny-ass motherfucker in the fucking bar moving toward her. Some were whooping and hollering, singing the song with her like it was some rock anthem at a stadium concert. Some swung women around on the dance floor, but every single one of them was homing in on her. And the little witch looked disturbingly familiar.

As she danced on stage and flirted with the audience, I became aware I'd left the bar and was moving toward her myself. I'd love to say I was caught up in the moment, in the music and the spontaneity of it all. I'd love to say that. But the fact was, it was the woman. Her beauty and sexuality. Her passion for life and people. And I knew the little witch! How the fuck had she ended up here?

Odette Muse was trouble with a capital *T-R-O-U-B-L-E*. She was also the much younger half-sister of a man I knew when we were in the Air Force together. Last I heard, he still lived in Palm Beach, Florida, and rode with a club called Salvation's Bane. I'd met Odette there where she was trying to sneak into the compound with a prospect she was way too good for. At sixteen she'd been a free spirit. In love with life and all the pleasures of the flesh, so to speak.

That had only been two years ago, but it was a memory that was clear as fucking crystal. I'd stopped her from fucking that prospect by dragging her back to her brother, but I had no doubt she'd found someone else. Hopefully a man more worthy of her beauty and passion. As well as closer to her own fucking age. Though now, at eighteen, I suppose it didn't matter as much.

I clenched my fists as I made my way toward the stage

like I was in a trance. Emotions were elusive for me. Things better left in a sealed box inside my mind. Not today. Rage like nothing I'd ever experienced poured through me like molten lava. Hot and viscous. It clung to my insides and seared me from the inside out as I watched other men watching her. Touching her when she danced near them as she sang fucking karaoke. I wasn't good with emotions. Mine or anyone else's. So this punch to the gut was as unwelcome as it was unexpected.

Odette was better than this. She should sing her own songs. Be in a famous band. Anything other than the main entertainment at fucking karaoke night in a backwoods bar. I was torn between jerking her off the stage and taking her out back to spank her delectable ass, or killing any motherfucker who touched her. Maybe I'd do both.

I'd just reached the stage when the song ended. She stood there with a huge smile on her face, holding a microphone while she waved at the cheering crowd. Odette jumped straight up, throwing her arms in the air in joy, laughing like she didn't have a care in the world. What the fuck was she doing here? And why wouldn't Blade give us a heads-up if he knew his sister was coming this way?

She stumbled sideways and nearly fell on her ass. Thank God I was there to catch her, or she'd have broken her fool neck falling from the stage. Like she hadn't just fallen off the stage right into a strange man's arms, Odette laughed and threw her arms around my neck. I could smell the alcohol on her the second she dropped into my arms but also her own faint scent of honeysuckle. That scent had haunted me ever since the first day I met Odette.

The little nymph buried her face in my neck and inhaled. “Ain’t smelled a man like you since I tried to nail me a biker.” God, that sultry voice! The woman had me hard as a fucking rock with just her fucking voice. And her scent. And the softness of her skin. The crowd roared and the people next to us pawed at her. She seemed oblivious as she nuzzled her face against my skin. “So delicious...”

“Snap out of it, Odette!” I growled at her. No clue if she heard me or not, but I doubted she did. Even if it wasn’t so loud I couldn’t hear myself think in there, especially once another song started up and the next singer belted out her song as loud as Odette had, I was pretty sure Odette was completely wasted. Anything I said or did until she sobered up would be a waste of time and breath.

I moved to the front of the bar and the exit, needing to get her out of there so I could at least make sure she was OK. Blaze and Wylde fell in step beside me. Wylde was cracking up, Blaze grinned but shook his head. Whether it was at me or Wylde I had no idea but it had better have been Wylde. I wasn’t in the mood.

“Bro, I wish like fuck you could’ve seen your face when you realized who was up on stage.” Wylde was wheezing he was laughing so hard.

“Wylde, you might want to back off for a while,” Blaze advised, clapping the younger man on the shoulder. “Don’t think this is the time.”

“Need a cage.” My voice was rough with anger, and I nearly bared my teeth at Wylde. “Not your fuckin’ mouth.”

“Not to worry. I got Clutch bringing the Bronco. He can take your girl back to the compound.” Thankfully, Blaze

still had his head on straight. Though, like fuck Clutch was doing anything with my girl.

Except she wasn't my girl. I didn't say anything, but no one — *no one* — was touching Odette but me. That included my brothers. *Especially* my brothers. Because she had a thing for bikers. Probably all the men her brother hung around. Blade had never made it a secret he belonged to an MC. Even in the conservative area he lived in, he wore his colors loud and proud.

Sure enough, it wasn't but a couple seconds, I saw Clutch pull around the corner in the dark blue Bronco. He rolled down the window and grinned.

“Need a lift?” He flashed a friendly half smile when he rolled the window down.

“No,” I snapped. “Get out.”

Clutch's demeanor changed in an instant. “You lettin' me ride your bike? 'Cause I gotta tell you. I'm pretty fuckin' fond of this cage and I know how much you love that fuckin' Harley.”

I did bare my teeth this time. “Get. Out.”

“You're my brother, Cyrus. And I know you got issues but I'm the road captain in this outfit. Which means I fuckin' outrank you. And you don't get to fuckin' tell me what to do with the fuckin' cage.”

“Long story, Clutch,” Blaze offered. “Take his bike and I'll fill you in.”

Somewhere in my mind, I knew there was a reason I should protest Blaze giving Clutch permission to ride my bike,

but all I could focus on at the moment was Odette. She'd passed out in my arms soon after she started sniffing my neck. Now she was snoring softly, her lips against my skin. She was fine now, but how would she do on the ride home?

"Where's Stitches?" I wanted him to check her over before I put her to bed. Might be something other than alcohol and I needed to make sure.

Blaze opened the passenger door to the cage and I settled Odette in, reclining the seat back a bit so she had a better center of gravity. I didn't want her pitching forward or to the side as I drove.

"Think he had a shift tonight. Want me to have him come see you when he gets off?"

I met Blaze's gaze with what I was sure was a hostile one of my own. "No, dumbass. I want you to tell him I need his fuckin' ass at the fuckin' clinic. Now."

"Not sure it works that way, Cyrus." Blaze scrubbed the back of his neck. "How 'bout I tell him we're meetin' him at the hospital. He can tell you what you need to do then."

Wylde let out an angry squawk as Clutch practically tossed his drunk ass in the back seat. "Not a word outa you, Wylde. And don't fuckin' puke in my cage!" Clutch snarled. "You do, I'll take the cleanin' out in your hide."

"Ain't gonna puke." Wylde rested his head against the back of the seat.

"Yeah? The sweat on your brow and the way you're slurrin' your words say otherwise." Clutch went to the back and opened the tailgate. He rummaged around before shutting it and thrusting a barf bag in front of Wylde. "You puke in the

fuckin' bag. Get me?"

"Sure thing. You don't gotta be so mean." His eyes were closed and he held the bag in his hand resting on his leg, but made no move to ready it for use.

Clutch ground his teeth and pointed at me. "You're responsible for that fuck."

"Nope. He got himself drunk. He's responsible for his own Goddamned self. Me being designated driver is the only reason I'm lettin' him in here now."

"How the fuck were you gonna be the DD without a fuckin' cage?"

I shrugged. "Wylde rode bitch. Always does. Blaze never drinks enough to not be safe on a bike. Besides, that's why we keep you on."

That wasn't true. He was road captain so he was in charge of any runs we did. It was a complicated process where he had to plan out routes that didn't intersect another club's territory without permission. He also kept the cages and bikes all in top working order. Anything happening while on a run was his responsibility. He was not required to be on call for anyone who got drunk and couldn't drive themselves back home. But he always was.

Clutch pointed at me. "You're on thin ice."

"You gonna ride my bike back to the clubhouse or not?" I was done here. I needed to get Stitches to check Odette over before I left her alone to sleep it off.

"Fine. Be warned you're on my shit list, you bastard."

"As long as I get what I want, I couldn't give a good

Goddamn.” I climbed in and took off before Clutch could change his mind.

I didn’t wait for the notification from Blaze that Stitches was waiting on us. I moved it to the hospital and trusted my brother to be waiting when I got there.

“You’re in so much trouble, little girl,” I muttered even as I reached over to grab Odette’s wrist to check her pulse.

“Ain’t no little girl.” Wylde mumbled from the back seat. I’d forgotten he was there.

“No. You’re a little bitch,” I snapped. “You knew she was here. Did you know how fucking’ drunk she was, too?”

“Nah. Didn’t see her tonight but she’s been here every karaoke night for the last month. Never been drunk before.”

“She know you saw her?”

“Nope.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror at Wylde. He stuck his tongue out like he had a bad taste in his mouth, then scratched his balls and adjusted himself. Fucker. He was drunk off his ass. I was looking forward to making tomorrow a special kind of hell for the little fucker. Next thing I knew, he was snoring. It wasn’t subtle.

The trip to the hospital where Stitches worked took me about fifteen minutes. During that time, Wylde continued to snore. Every time he inhaled or exhaled, the noise got louder and louder. At least it seemed that way. I grabbed a bottle lid in the cup holder and threw it at Wylde. “Shut the fuck up, asshole! Wake up!”

“Wha’dja hit me for?” God. The bastard was whining.

I hated whining.

“Cause you’re snoring like a motherfucker. I’ve slept under fuckin’ train bridges that were quieter.”

“Bastard...” He muttered his grievance before he was back to snoring. Odette didn’t seem fazed by the noise at all. She slept peacefully in the seat next to me, a little half smile on her face like she was in pure bliss.

I had my fingers on her wrist at her pulse. I told myself I was ensuring she wasn’t in danger, but the fact was, I loved the way her skin felt on mine. The steady beat of her pulse reassured me, but there was more to it than that. I needed Odette close and couldn’t figure out why. Her brother was a badass as well as a very gifted pediatric oncologist. We’d saved each other’s asses multiple times while on tour. I figured I owed him my loyalty because of all the shit we’d been through together. Maybe that was it.

Given that Blade hadn’t called ahead and let us know his sister was in the area, he likely didn’t know where she was. Which meant she was on her own. Which meant I had to take care of her until her brother was properly notified and had a plan in place to keep her safe. That was perfectly logical. That’s why I needed to make sure she was all right. That her current state was self-induced alcohol intoxication instead of something more sinister. Like someone slipping something into her drink. That thought brought back the rage I’d fought against earlier. Which, again, was odd. Emotions never ruled me.

After parking the Bronco, I went around to Odette’s side and picked her up. I shut Wylde in the vehicle with the fob safely in my pocket. As I walked across the parking lot

with her, Odette wrapped her arms around my neck and snuggled in. Like she'd done before, she buried her nose in my neck and inhaled deeply before sighing happily and settling once again.

She weighed next to nothing. I'd tossed her over my shoulder and marched her straight to her brother the last time I'd seen her, but I was sure she was heavier back then. How much weight had she lost? And why? Surely, she wasn't on some kind of fucking diet. The woman had been too skinny two years ago.

"Girl, you need a keeper." I muttered to her as I got near the back entrance to the ER. I spotted Stitches leaning against the building, looking at his phone. The second he spotted us, he moved toward me.

"What happened?" His tone was no nonsense, something I appreciated after the fiasco with Wylde.

"Not sure. Probably just drunk, but anything is possible."

Stitches took out a pen light and checked her eyes. She cried out and flinched, turning her face into my shoulder to hide her eyes.

"S'op it!" Her words were slurred, but at least she was responsive.

"Smells like a brewery." Stitches sighed. "What makes you think she has something on board other than alcohol?"

"Nothing. Just covering all the bases. This is Blade's sister."

"Blade. Donovan Muse? With Salvation's Bane?"

“Yep. He and I were tight in the Air Force. Can’t imagine he’d let her come all the way up here alone without givin’ us a heads-up.”

“Maybe he told Sting.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But Blade knows I’m here. He’d tell everyone in the Goddamned area he trusted to keep her out of trouble if he knew. That includes me.”

Stitches scrubbed a hand over his face. “I suppose I can do a drug screen on her. Won’t get specifics, but it can identify the main things.”

“I just need to know that she’s OK. If I need to get her treatment beyond supportive care.”

Stitches nodded. “I can help you with that. Come on inside. Take her to my sleep room and I’ll draw her blood. Got a lab tech who owes me a favor. I’ll get him to run a drug screen on it. In the meantime, I can set her up with a banana bag. You can manage it at the clubhouse. If anything comes up in her drug test, I’ll let you know what you need to do.”

“Good.”

I followed Stitches in the back and to a small room with a twin bed, a refrigerator, a TV, and a private bathroom. It was clean and looked like it hadn’t been used this shift.

“Lay her down. I’ll get some stuff to start an IV and draw her blood.”

Ten minutes later, Stitches handed me a bag of bright yellow fluids with IV tubing in a separate package. He also gave her some Narcan just to be on the safe side, but it didn’t seem to do anything. “Don’t spike it until you get ready to use

it. With the new dispensary, I had to practically give my left nut to get this under the table. Last thing I need is to have to get another one because you forgot to clamp off the tubing and it all leaked out before you got to use it.”

“I may not have transitioned my medic license into the civilian world, but I’m not stupid. I know how to manage IV fluids.” I felt my temper spike again. This was insane. I hadn’t felt anything like this since I was a kid. Before I’d learned how to bury any emotion I didn’t understand deep inside me where it couldn’t get out. “Ain’t a dumbass.”

“Sorry, man. Didn’t mean to imply you were. Explaining myself is a force of habit. Fewer misunderstandings and accidents that way.”

Blaze was waiting in the hall when I exited with Odette in my arms. She was sleeping peacefully.

“Thought you’d have more trouble with her.” Blaze nodded toward the arm where she had an IV site at the bend of her elbow. “Didn’t hear her cry out when Stitches stuck her.”

“Cause she didn’t even fucking flinch.” That worried me. The only time she’d reacted was when Stitches had checked her eyes. The rest of the time, she slept peacefully. “You sure I should take her back to the clubhouse, Stitches? What if she’s been drugged with something that she needs to be monitored for?”

“Then I’ll call and have you bring her back. I’m betting it’s just the alcohol. She didn’t have a reaction to the Narcan, so it’s not anything with opiates involved. The best thing is for her to get those fluids and sleep it off. Main thing to watch for is vomiting. You don’t want her on her back. Be best to have her on her side. That way she doesn’t aspirate if she gets sick

and she won't get smothered if she's too drunk to move the pillow away from her face if she's on her stomach."

I knew all this, of course. I didn't need anyone fucking telling me how to take care of a drunk. Looking down at her beautiful face, though, I felt a sliver of apprehension coil in my belly. This woman was in my care. She was the sister of a man I considered a close friend. Though every man in Iron Tzars MC was my brother, I didn't have many people I considered a friend. The compulsion to take care of Odette was too strong to ignore and that had to be because of my loyalty to Blade. Not because of Odette herself. She was nothing to me.

But as I continued to look at her, I grew more and more possessive of her. That feeling had nothing to do with my friend and everything to do with the woman in my arms. I shook myself. I had to get a grip on these feelings. This is why I hated dealing with emotions. There was no good reason for them. I didn't even know this girl! I'd met her exactly once and it hadn't been the best of meetings. In fact, I was pretty sure she hated me after I'd carried her like a sack of potatoes to her brother and ratted out her and the prospect she was with for sneaking into the Bane compound without getting permission from a patched member.

I took her back to the Bronco. Wylde was standing next to the cage, one hand braced on the back quarter panel while he bent double and heaved his guts up. There is nothing that smells worse than alcoholic vomit. If this was in Odette's future, I had no idea how I'd handle it. I told myself it was because the smell would be unbearable. In reality, I wasn't looking forward to seeing her as miserable as Wylde looked. Just the thought put a sharp pain in my chest, and I settled

Odette closer to me, rubbing my cheek against her silky hair.

Then I jerked myself straight, letting her head fall back against my shoulder. What the fuck was this? Odette was drunk. An inconvenience at best. If she was miserable because she'd drunk too much, it would serve as a reminder for her not to do this ever again! I should be looking forward to making tomorrow as miserable for her as I planned on doing to Wylde. But the thought made my chest hurt worse. There was no way I was going to be glad she was hurting and miserable. Why? Good Goddamned question.

Good Goddamned question.

Chapter Two

Odette

There was currently a freight train and a jackhammer storming and pounding their way through my head. My eyes felt like someone had thrown sand in them and my mouth tasted like my cat had shit in my mouth.

Lovely.

“Fuckin’ bitch.” I mumbled as I groaned and turned over. Thankfully, the room was dark. Woo-hoo for blackout curtains. Once on my back, the room spun horribly so I let my leg fall off the bed. Only it didn’t touch the floor. So I groaned again as I scooted to the edge...

And promptly fell off the bed with a thud.

“Ohhhh...” I groaned, knowing I should get up. Instead, I lay on my back with my knees bent and didn’t move.

“My, my, my. Someone had a rough night.”

The voice was deep, gruff, and disturbingly familiar. “Fuck you.” I threw out the insult with no real heat. It was reflex. Besides, who would have the audacity to approach me before I’d had my coffee? Whoever he was, he was just asking to get his balls handed to him.

“Need coffee.”

“Yeah, that would probably help the headache. Got some Ibuprofen and Gatorade for you too. Want to feel better? You’ll take them and go back to bed.”

I squinted and looked up at the man standing over me. The room was dark so I couldn't see him, but I wasn't scared. Which was odd. I hated strange men getting too close to me. But this guy was different. At least, I thought he was. I had vague memories of him carrying me out of the bar.

"You smell good," I murmured to myself. Because he *had* smelled good. It was the strangest combination of outdoors musk, pine, and... gasoline? I remember thinking about the one time I was in the arms of a man who smelled like that. It had been two years ago, and the man was so off-limits it wasn't even funny. Which was why I'd been doing something I shouldn't have been doing. And why I hadn't minded so much getting caught.

"Yeah, you said that before." He knelt and lifted me into his arms. My stomach protested the movement and I whimpered, swallowing furiously and trying to keep the nausea at bay. "Bathroom," he said, carrying me. Which only made the nausea worse. Also, I *really* had to pee.

The guy seemed to understand my urgency because he made it to the bathroom fast. Just in time, too, because everything I'd ever eaten over my whole entire life and absorbed in the womb before I was born came up out of my stomach in a violent gush of foul-smelling, explosive puke. And I might have peed a little before I realized.

The toilet flushed and I startled. Oh. The good-smelling guy. Who knew just how much I'd debased myself. And had watched me puke my guts up. Lovely.

"Ohhhh..." I sat back on my ass, holding my head in my hands. I wished I could see him but my vision was blurry from tears and the needles stabbing through my eyeballs

straight to my brain, making both hurt like a son of a bitch.

“Seem to be fond of that sound. I take it you’re not used to this much alcohol?” God, his voice was yummy! I could listen to that raspy rumble every single day forever.

“Some woman’s a lucky bitch and I hate her.”

There was silence before he spoke again. This time, I didn’t think he was talking to me. “Stitches back yet? Tell him I need him in my room. Now.” There was a pause. “I don’t give a flyin’ fuck what the bastard’s doin’ right now, tell him to get the fuck up here!”

Wow. That sounded bad.

Stitches. That name was familiar. I should know who that was. Sounded like a road name, like my brother. His was Blade. I always thought it was because he was a doctor, but he said that wasn’t it. And why was I thinking about my brother? I wanted to think about the man who’d carried me to the bathroom. Except, for some reason, I didn’t want to think about him either. Or, more accurately, that he’d carried me to the bathroom and sat with me while I’d just brought up a comedic amount of puke...

I groaned. “This *cannot* be my life right now.” A washcloth appeared in front of me and I took it gratefully, wiping my face with the cool rag. “Thank you.” I muttered. A glass of water appeared as well. He took the cloth and I took the glass, rinsing my mouth out before spitting it in the toilet and flushing. Then I gulped the rest of the contents down like I’d been a week in the desert with no water. My mouth felt like I had.

“Need a toothbrush.”

“Got one ready.” I shivered. That voice could melt panties across four counties. Scratch that. Across forty or fifty states. “Come on, lil’ bit.”

I froze. I’d heard that nickname only once in my life. Two years ago. “No.” I shook my head, then groaned as both pain and dizziness assailed me. “God...”

“Pretty sure God had little to do with it. Stand up and brush your teeth. Stitches will be here in a minute.”

I tried to get up, but my legs didn’t seem to work. Neither did my balance. When I fell back on my ass, gentle hands lifted me into strong arms and the next thing I knew I was standing in front of the vanity at the sink.

“Open your eyes,” he said. “Dizziness’ll be worse if you keep them closed.”

“Don’t wanna open my eyes,” I pouted.

“Afraid the real world will come crashing down around you?” His arm was solidly around my waist, holding me upright. My knees felt like Jell-O and the room was spinning so violently with me upright, I was pretty sure I was going to hurl again.

“Something like that.” My voice was more of a whimper than anything else. It shamed me, given I was pretty sure I knew who this man was, but I was too sick and hung over to give it much thought. Which was kind of my motto. Never worry today about something you can put off until tomorrow.

“Open.” His voice was commanding but gentle. In my weakened state, I had no choice but to obey that tone of voice coming from this guy. Who I was pretty sure I knew.

Taking a breath, I did as he commanded... and came face-to-face with the man who'd haunted my dreams for two fucking years.

“Why did it have to be you?” I looked into those dark eyes I'd seen every single time I closed my eyes, refusing to look anywhere else. Unable to look anywhere else. He mesmerized me the same now as he did two years ago.

“It had to be someone. You'd rather it had been your brother?” He raised an imperious eyebrow at me.

“Ain't like he won't be here in less than twenty-four hours once you tell him. Besides, he's my brother. Not a man.”

Cyrus actually barked out a laugh. “Can't wait to tell him that. How exactly would you classify him if not a man?”

“My brother.”

Any humor in his eyes died in that instant. He knew what I meant, and he wasn't happy about the implication.

“Don't even think about it, Odette. I'm not the man for you.”

“Nope. You're not.” I straightened and pushed back against him. To my surprise, he didn't immediately let go. Instead, his grip around my waist tightened.

“Let me go.”

“Not until we get a few things straight.”

“Look, I'm gonna puke again.”

He gave me a hard look and shook his head slightly. “Stitches is coming back to check on you. You're still dehydrated. How much'd you drink?”

“Too much,” I snapped. “OK? I know I fucked up. I don’t need you tattling on me to my big brother. Now get out.”

I didn’t really expect him to, but he did. Cyrus stepped back, holding my gaze in the mirror for a few more seconds before leaving the bathroom. Immediately, I wanted to call him back. Cyrus was my hero. My knight in shining armor. I’d never admit it to a soul, but the only reason I’d been with that prospect two years ago was to get inside the compound to get a closer look at Cyrus.

He’d been visiting my brother and I’d been completely gobsmacked. He was aloof but larger than life. He strode into the compound like he owned the place. I’d been parked outside, waiting on my brother. Donovan — Blade — had refused to let me inside because I was under eighteen and because I honestly had no business there. I didn’t want to hang with my older brother, and he wasn’t letting me hang with the guys in the club. Or the girls. I could have probably conned him into letting me stay with the old ladies or some of the older girls, but it’d have been pushing it. Besides, Donovan knew me. He’d have known there was something up I didn’t want to tell him.

There was a knock at the door, and I cringed. “Go away.”

“Can’t do that, Odette.” That wasn’t Cyrus’s voice. “Not until I check on you.”

I huffed out an exasperated sigh before stomping to the door and jerking it open. “There. See? I’m fine.” When I would have slammed the door in his face, the bastard stuck his heavily booted foot in the way.

“Not happenin’, little lady. Out with you.”

“I need a shower.”

“Not until I’m sure you ain’t gonna fall on your ass and hurt yourself.”

Yeah. I knew that tone. Heard it from my brother often enough. It was his doctor voice. The one that said, “This is for your own good,” even when it was more about getting his way.

“Fine.” I jerked the door all the way open and pushed past Stitches. Because, really, it couldn’t be anyone else. “What do I have to do to convince you I can take a fucking shower on my own?”

“Watch your language.” Stitches rummaged through his bag, not even looking at me as he scolded me.

“I’m not a naughty child. You don’t get to tell me what I can or can’t say.”

“No. I’m the doctor who stole medicine from the hospital last night, putting my job and my career in jeopardy. All to help you.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“No. You didn’t. Do you know why?” Before I could answer he continued, never once looking up from his stash-o’-medical shit. “Because you were completely incapacitated. Did you do it on purpose?”

“Yup. Solidly. It might have been self-destructive behavior, but I did it. Why? Because I wanted to have a good time.”

“Yeah?” Of course, he looked up this time. ‘Cause, really, being an ass while not looking at me was totally off the table. He wanted to drive this home and, if I were honest, I

didn't blame him. "Havin' a good time now?"

I stuck my chin up, not cowed in the least. "If you're implying I didn't know what was coming, you'd be wrong. I simply didn't care."

"All right. That's enough." Cyrus stepped closer to the bed where I sat waiting for Blade to do whatever he was going to do. "You may not care, Odette, but did you ever think there might be people in this world who did?"

"About how hungover I got?" I snorted. "No, Cyrus. I didn't. Why? Because it's no big deal! People get drunk all the time and manage to survive a long fucking while."

"Language." Both men spoke in unison, and I wanted to throw something at them.

"You know what? Fuck both of ya. I'm outta here." I stood to go, but Cyrus shoved me back down. Gently, but it was a shove nonetheless.

"Sit the fuck down. Stitches ain't done, and you and me gonna have a talk."

"You're not the boss of me." It slipped out before I could stop it. Yeah. That wasn't getting me anywhere in a big Goddamned hurry.

"That's pretty fuckin' evident, considering you're still sitting comfortably." Cyrus crossed his arms over his chest and looked down his nose at me with an angry glare, a look I'd seen from my brother on more than one occasion.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you threatening to spank me?"

"I don't threaten, Odette. I'm simply stating a fact.

Your brother is in the middle of something he can't get away from, though he wanted to do just that. Leave a child he's trying to help to come get your drunk ass and take you back to Florida because he loves you that much. He's supposed to call me today and let me know if he can safely leave. I told him not to, that I'd take responsibility for you, but he didn't want to do that. Probably because he knows I'll make you toe the line and he feels sorry for you."

"My brother should not feel sorry for me. I did this to myself and he knows it. I don't want or need his sympathy. Not for this."

"She's fine, Cyrus." Stitches interrupted a conversation I really didn't want him to hear, but I had completely forgotten about him listening. Which was just as humiliating as Cyrus seeing me like this. It was worse than that, actually. Cyrus had been the one to drag me out of that bar. I knew it because I remembered his scent. It was comforting even as it teased me with something I knew I could never have. "I brought a bag of fluids to give her. None of the vitamins it really should have, but I wasn't giving my right nut to go with my left one. Not for this. She'll feel better once it's in. Open it up and let it go as fast as gravity will let it."

He hooked a thin tube to the IV in my arm that I'd forgotten about. I was glad it was there because I hated needles.

Cyrus nodded, never taking his eyes from me. "Thanks, Stitches."

"I know you're waiting on the OK from Blade, but my advice is for you to put her over your knee and spank her ass until she can't sit for a fuckin' week." He shut his bag and

gave me a hard look. “Your brother would be ashamed of the way you’re acting.”

OK, that hurt. I tried not to wince but wasn’t sure I pulled it off. I knew I was being a little brat, but I felt awful. Only thing I wanted was to take a shower and sleep for a week.

Once Stitches was out the door, Cyrus knelt in front of me where I sat on the bed. “What’s all this about?”

“Nothing.” Childish? Yeah. But I wasn’t ready to talk to him just yet. I’d come all this way for that very thing, but I never expected to find Cyrus like this.

“Uh-huh. Fine.” He stood and hooked hung the IV bag from a pole Stitches had left. “Lie back and rest while this goes in. I’ll bring you something light to eat and some more painkillers. Once that bag is empty and you’ve got more on your stomach than what I suspect is rum, I’ll help you take a shower.”

“In no reality are you helping me take a shower, Cyrus. I’ve been bathing on my own a very long time. I can manage. Even if I have to sit on the ledge to do it, I am not letting you help me.” I was ignoring the fact that he knew me well enough to know it had been rum I was drinking. He likely knew about the Coke I drank with it too. If I dwelt on that little tidbit of information too long, I’d start fantasizing again.

He sighed and shook his head slightly. It was like he was having an internal argument with himself. And losing. “Sit back. I’ll bring you some buttered toast and apple slices. You can nibble on that while those fluids go in. We’ll talk about the rest later.”

Cyrus left then, leaving me alone with my thoughts. He was right about one thing. My brother didn't need my dramatics. In his line of work, there was enough real-life drama to do anyone. I was ashamed of my behavior, but I didn't want to involve Donovan in this. I didn't even want to involve Cyrus, but he was the first person I thought to turn to. Why was anyone's guess. The only history we had was when he'd hauled me over his shoulder and marched me straight to my brother. It was probably the image I'd built of him in my mind over all this time. He was nothing to me. I was nothing to him. But in my little pea-brained mind, I'd latched on to him for some unknown reason and thought he could make everything better.

Well, he couldn't. And this was the only time I could ever allow myself to get this drunk. Shouldn't have done it this time and likely wouldn't have if I'd been thinking straight. I'd just wanted to chase away the pain. Unfortunately, everything wrong in my life was still there. Now it was time to deal with it. Alone. Which meant, I needed to get out of here and start planning for the future. A future that didn't include a grumpy, emotionally unavailable biker. No matter how much I wanted it to.

Chapter Three

Cyrus

“Stitches!” I jogged down the hall after the club doctor. He turned, waiting for me to catch up before we continued on together. “What did her blood test show?”

“Haven’t reviewed them. Got a trauma in last night after you guys left that took up all my time, then you called me up here. I have them in my office. You can come with me if you want.” Yeah.

“I need to know what I’m up against.”

He shrugged. “You’re up against an immature brat used to manipulating people to get her way.”

I snorted. “I’m up against more than that. Being Blade’s sister means I have to treat her with kid gloves.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Stitches sneered. “That girl needs her ass busted. If Blade can’t see that he’s a dumb shit. And I know he’s not a dumb shit. Do what you have to and keep her safe. That includes punishing her for putting herself in danger last night. What if you and the other guys hadn’t been there? What would have happened to her?”

“I know. I still want the OK from Blade to take her in hand. He should get back to me in the next couple of hours.” I hoped. I’d told him to take his time because Odette was safe and he had a very sick child he was helping. Not that Odette wasn’t as important, but she was looked after. She was safe.

Stitches opened the door to his office and went around

behind his desk. I sat on the couch opposite him, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee. He pulled out a couple pieces of paper from his briefcase and rested his forearms on the desk while he scanned over it.

He frowned as he read over first one page, then the second. Then the first. “Mother fuck...”

“Was she drugged?” I sat up straight, fury settling inside me like I’d never known. Emotions were hard on the best of days. I didn’t understand them in others and had no idea what to do with my own. I preferred to be in my workshop, building and designing things for the stuff Argent Tech supplied us with. They’d give us a weapon or security measure and I... made it better. Only reason I didn’t work at Argent was that asshole Giovanni Romano didn’t like being upstaged. Well, that, and I didn’t belong there. I belonged with Iron Tzars. My brothers.

“Nope. All alcohol. However, she has a positive pregnancy test.” He looked up. “She or Blade say anything about her being pregnant?”

I felt like all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. “She’s... pregnant?”

“Yep. My lab tech friend ran a quantitative test to determine how elevated her HCG level was. By the math, she’s maybe four or five weeks. Not far.”

“So maybe she doesn’t know.”

“There is a very strong chance she doesn’t know. But a home test would pick it up at this point.” He sat back, rubbing his finger under his nose. It was a gesture I’d seen him do often when he was deep in thought. “Maybe she came up here

for abortion care.”

“There are other places she could have gone. Why here? At four to five weeks, she could still get it done in Florida.”

“True...” Me and Stitches stared at each other a long moment. “You know her?”

“I dragged her back to her brother two years ago when I caught a prospect trying to sneak her in at Salvation’s Bane. She didn’t have permission to be in the compound and was only sixteen at the time. The prospect in question was twenty-three. Said he didn’t know she was underage, but Thorn didn’t let that slide. Kicked the fucker out without a moment’s hesitation.”

“Good thing he wasn’t here,” Stitches muttered. “There any reason she might come to you?”

My gaze widened, then narrowed. “Me. Specifically me.” Stitches nodded and I had to really think about that. “Ain’t smelled a man like you since I tried to nail me a biker,” I muttered, repeating the words she’d said when I picked her up from that bar last night.

“What?”

I brought my focus back to Stitches. “Just something Odette said last night when I carried her out of the bar.”

Stitches whistled. “Was that a good thing or a bad one?”

“Well, she buried her face in my neck and called me delicious.”

“Christ.” Stitches grinned. Then chuckled. “Bro,

you're so fucked.”

“Bastard.”

He shrugged. “Well, you wanted answers. I just read the paper and tell you what the numbers mean.”

“Yeah, well, I still need answers.” I stood. “She needs food in her stomach.”

“And rest. And water. Hydrate her with something other than booze, will ya?”

“All over that.”

“You gonna tell Blade?”

I paused. Was I? “Not sure. I’ll have to think about that. I’ve already violated her privacy.”

“Whoa there, brother.” Stitches stood, raising the lab test results once before tossing them to the desk. “She gave up that right when she chose to get blackout drunk and pass out in your arms. She scared the bejesus out of you and me both.”

“I could just see having to call Blade and tell him his sister was brain-dead from alcohol poisoning.”

“Same. So, any right she had to privacy went out the window with the alcohol she consumed.”

I gave a crisp nod. “Fine. But I’m not telling him until I hear back from him. Ain’t makin’ a special call for this and I’m not telling him if he’s eyeball deep in work. She’s an adult. She can work this out herself. She has people here to help her through it, including me.”

“Especially you.” Any humor Stitches showed before now vanished. “Especially you, Cyrus. You get that, right?”

“I get she latched on to me for whatever reason. I never encouraged her to do so.”

“At some point, you need to learn to play well with others.”

“Why? All that does is invite someone else to force me into decisions I wouldn’t otherwise make.”

“It also puts someone in your life you care about. Who cares about you?”

I snorted. “All the more reason to avoid, as you say, playing with others. If you care about someone, they could leave you. Betray you.” I clenched my teeth, pushing the memories back down where they couldn’t overwhelm me.

“That can happen to anyone, Cyrus. Anyone can leave or die. Or betray you.”

“Not here. Not at Tzars. We have a code —”

“That works for someone not betraying you, but not leaving. We all live dangerous lives. You saw what happened last month.”

“Yeah. I did. Atlas lost a child and nearly his woman. Brick almost lost his woman.” I snapped out my answer harsher than I should have, but that memory was a raw, ugly scar on my mind. They weren’t my women or my child, but the whole experience had been... uncomfortable. Even now, I absently rubbed at my chest. We could have lost so much more that day than just our peace of mind. “I won’t put myself in that kind of position.”

Stitches gave me a knowing look but wisely, let it drop. “All right.” He raised his hands in surrender. “But I think

you're missing out on more than you realize.”

“That’s my problem, Stitches. Not yours.”

With that, I stood and left. I needed to get Odette some food and make sure she was settled in. Then I’d turn her over to the old ladies. They’d see to it she had what she needed and was taken care of. I’d keep an eye on her, but from a distance. If she had some romantic hope I’d be the one to save her, she could think again. I didn’t do old ladies. Or children. I couldn’t. Either would make me vulnerable and I couldn’t have that. Not again. *Never* again.

I snagged the food I’d promised Odette and stomped my way back to my room. Why I’d put her in there I had no fucking idea. I needed to get Roman to assign her another room. Her own. That created its own set of problems, but they wouldn’t be *my* problems.

Opening the door, I stomped in... only to find Odette wasn’t where I’d left her.

“Odette!” I barked out her name, irritation and something else filling me. “Get your ass out here!”

Nothing.

“Odette!”

I moved to the bathroom. The shower had been used recently, but there was no sign of her. I glanced around the room and spotted the trash can. She’d removed her IV and dumped it and the half-finished bag of fluids into it. Her clothes from last night were gone and the shorts I’d put her in tossed onto the vanity. I couldn’t find my shirt. Further evidence she’d come here to see me.

“When I get my hands on you, little girl, I’m gonna beat your ass.”

I pulled out my phone and shot a text to Wylde. If she had a phone on her he could trace it. He could also pull security footage and see if she’d already left the compound, and if so which way she went and if she was on foot.

Seconds later, Wylde facetimes me. “She left about fifteen minutes ago. Looks like she called an Uber. I hacked into her phone as well as the phone of the Uber driver. Looks like they’re headed to *The Women’s Hospital Deaconess*. She’s gotten an appointment with an OB? What the fuck?”

“Send the address to my phone. Can you get all her paperwork filled out before she gets there?”

“Sure. Everything’s electronic now.”

“List me as her...” I winced. I couldn’t believe I was saying this. “Husband.”

“Duuuude...”

“Just do it! Then file the appropriate paperwork to make it a reality.”

“Sting’ll kill you, Cyrus. Literally. Then me, just for being involved.”

“Only if she insists on a divorce. She won’t.”

“You’re playing with fire, Cyrus. I like it.” Fucker had the biggest shit-eating grin on his face in the history of the world. “What’s your plan? Wait. You didn’t knock her up, did you?”

“No, dumb shit. I didn’t. But this is the only way to get her to let me help her.”

“You know, you could just ask.”

“And give her the chance of saying no? Not bloody likely.”

“Well, if Sting doesn’t kill you, I have a feeling Blade will. From what I hear, he didn’t come by his name because he’s a doctor. Since this is his kid sister, he’s gonna have a helluva lot to say about this.”

“Fully aware. It’s a permanent situation.”

“Still think you need to talk to Sting about this. He’s gonna be pissed as hell.”

“This ain’t his choice,” I snapped. “It’s mine.”

Wylde raised his eyebrows. “It’s hers too, man.”

“You leave that to me.”

The bastard grinned brightly. “Knew you had a thing for her.”

“I met her twice, Wylde. There’s no way you can figure I have a thing for her.”

“Bless your heart.” He chuckled, shaking his head like he thought I was simple minded. “You forget I’m the motherfucking tech guy. You were more than a little preoccupied, so I did some snooping.”

“Wylde. Imma throw you a beatin’ like you ain’t ever had.”

“Don’t blame me. Everyone else was worried too.” The fucker continued to grin like an ape. “Your searches and browsing history tell me you’re using this as an excuse to take that girl for your own. She feel the same?”

I shrugged. “She ran straight to me, didn’t she?”

“I remember me being the one who dragged you to that bar last night. Not the other way around. You found her there. She didn’t find you.”

“How the fuck are you even upright? As drunk as you were last night, you should be holed up in a dark room, puking every other breath.”

“What can I say? I’m resilient like that. Now. Your girl. I’ll list you as her husband on her medical form, but I’m not actually filing a marriage certificate. Not until I get the go ahead from Sting.”

“Wylde —”

“Sorry, brother.” He grinned. “I value my life. And it ain’t Sting I’m afraid of. Blade is a scary-ass motherfucker, and I want Sting as a buffer between me and him if I marry his baby sister off to a man in a club that doesn’t allow divorce on pain of death.” The meaning of his words was grave, but he still had that shit-eating grin on his face. “In the meantime, go get your girl. Find out what the fuck’s goin’ on.”

“Not a word about this, Wylde. You do and I’ll get Giovanni Romano to delete your Fortnite account.”

Instantly, the man sobered, his face hardening like I’d just told him I’d kill his dog. “You do and I’ll hurt you worse.”

“Then keep your trap shut.” I hung up on him before climbing on my bike and taking off. I had a runaway bride to track down. For some strange reason, imagining her reaction to having me listed on her medical form as husband had one corner of my lips raising.

Strange.

Chapter Four

Odette

“No paperwork?” That was odd. “But I’ve never been here before.”

The lady behind the desk shrugged. “Apparently, they got enough from you when you scheduled your appointment.” She smiled kindly. “Just have a seat. It won’t be but a moment.”

I shook my head, but wandered off to sit. I had two positive home pregnancy tests, but this would tell the whole story. I knew I needed to question the paperwork more thoroughly, but I was so nervous I couldn’t think. If they said it was good, it was good. I’d given my information so quickly when I made the appointment, maybe they did have everything they needed.

As I sat in the corner, I jogged my leg and bit my thumbnail. What was I going to do if this was real? Surely it had been a test malfunction. A false reading. But on two different tests? From different manufacturers? When I’d gotten the first positive test, I’d bought another test of a different brand. Same result.

“Miss Muse?”

My head shot up, my gaze finding the nurse standing at the open door leading from the lobby to the exam rooms.

“That’s me,” I muttered, giving her a tentative smile.

She took me back to the nurses’ station, weighed me,

took my blood pressure, and had me pee in a cup. Once she put me in an exam room, she did a quick history and asked about my reason for seeing the doctor.

“I had a positive test,” I mumbled. “Just wanted to make sure it was a false positive.” I tried to smile, but didn’t quite pull it off.

She smiled. “I need you to completely disrobe. Here’s a gown and a drape. Just sit on the exam table and the doctor will be in shortly.”

I did as she said, stripping quickly and putting on the gown. Unlike most hospital gowns, this one covered my back but left the front open. I pulled it together and wrapped the paper drape over my legs. Taking a deep, calming breath, I tried to empty my mind. If I were any more nervous, I’d probably cry. Might anyway.

The door opened without even a cursory knock and in walked...

“Cyrus?”

He shut the door and sat in the chair next to the doctor’s work shelf. He leaned back, lacing his fingers over his belly and crossing his legs at the ankles.

“That’s right. You got ten seconds to come clean.”

I lifted my chin. “My life isn’t your business.”

“Yeah?” He lifted an eyebrow. “You ran, Odette. Straight to me. I want to know why.”

I shrugged. “It’s cooler up north. I don’t like humidity.”

“The truth, girl.”

“I’m not a girl!” I raised my voice before realizing other people could likely hear us. “I’m an adult, Cyrus. Regardless of what you think, I didn’t come here for you.”

“That’s two,” he said casually. “I have a feeling you’re not going to be sitting for a week.” He gave me a slight grin, like this was amusing to him. Fuck. “Or longer.”

“My life is none of your business.”

“We’ll see.” The bastard smirked like he held all the cards. Well, I knew my rights. They wouldn’t let him stay if I didn’t want him here. He could take a hike because I wasn’t going through this with him here.

“Why are you even here?”

“Like I said. You came to me.”

There was a knock on the door. Before I could say anything, Cyrus answered. “She’s ready.”

An older man walked in the room, a smile on his face. He had platinum hair and a deep tan. “Good morning, Miss Muse. I’m Dr. Redding. The nurse tells me you had a positive pregnancy test?”

I winced, closing my eyes. I didn’t dare to look over at Cyrus. Did he know?

“Yes.” I wanted to elaborate, but what was the point? Besides, I didn’t want to say anything more in front of Cyrus.

“Well, I think it’s pretty conclusive. Your quantitative test would put you at four to five weeks. Does that fit the time frame?”

“What?” Quantitative test? “I mean, yeah. That’s about right, but what do you mean by quantitative test?”

“Your blood test. It measures the amount of pregnancy hormone in your blood. I got it faxed over from the hospital lab a few minutes ago. Dr. Ewing had it sent over.”

“Ewing?” Before I realized what I was doing, I glanced over at Cyrus. He just gave me a slight, superior smirk.

“She had a bit of a mishap last night. Doc gave her some fluids and took her blood to make sure nothing else was wrong.”

“You know Dr. Ewing?”

“I do. We’re Air Force buddies.”

“Well then. Thank you for your service. As to this little mishap?” He raised an eyebrow. At Cyrus, the fucker.

“Let’s just say she imbibed a little too much and got herself dehydrated. Dr. Ewing was just covering all the bases.”

“Hmm.” Dr Redding frowned at me. “It’s not healthy to be doing that. Not while you’re pregnant and certainly not in early pregnancy.”

“I’m aware of that,” I snapped.

“All evidence to the contrary.” Cyrus never took his gaze from me. The frown on his face said he severely disapproved. He also didn’t show any surprise at my little... surprise.

“Mr. Wolfe. Did you bring her to Dr. Ewing?”

“I did. Like I said. We’re old buddies. I found her in a bad way and kept her safe.”

“I have you listed as her husband. I take it you’re the father?”

I gasped, staring at Cyrus. What the fuck?

“I am.” He met and held my gaze, daring me to contradict him.

“Good! I’m not sure what happened, but I’m glad she has someone looking out for her.”

“She does now.”

The rest of the visit passed in a blur. The doctor did an ultrasound and confirmed the baby was where it was supposed to be inside me, gave me a prescription for some prenatal vitamins and nausea medicine, then set me up with another appointment in a month.

“Don’t hesitate to let me know if you’re excessively sick or have any problems whatsoever. If you can’t reach me at the office, have Dr. Ewing contact me.”

“Trust me,” Cyrus said. “We will.”

The doctor left and Cyrus moved to the door and stood in front of it. “Get dressed. I’ll take you home.”

For some reason, that hit me like a punch to the gut. Tears burned my eyes and my throat tightened up. “I don’t... I don’t have a home.”

“Yeah, you do. I’ll take you there. Get dressed.”

I shook my head, but did as he instructed. I managed to get my underwear and shorts on but struggled with my bra. Cyrus was there, helping me straighten out the pullover sports bra before putting my T-shirt over my head. When I turned around, he settled his hands on my hips.

“You good?”

Was I? “I don’t know.” Tears I’d been holding back for a week overflowed and fell down my cheeks. Gazing into Cyrus’s eyes, I’d never felt more vulnerable in my life.

“You held it together this long. Hold on a little longer. Can you do that? For me?”

I sniffed and wiped the tears from my face, nodding as I did. “I’m good. I won’t embarrass you.”

He growled and pulled me into his embrace, holding me tightly. “Never, Odette. You could never embarrass me. For any reason.”

I trembled, struggling to keep myself together, all the while wondering how long I could manage. Now that the secret was out, all the emotion I’d held inside wanted to break free and rid my body and mind of everything I’d been holding in.

Cyrus stood with me, holding me securely while I gathered myself, trying to put the genie back in the bottle. It was hard. So very fucking hard. It took several minutes, but I finally managed. The second I tried to step away from him, Cyrus let me go. His arms dropped to his sides, and all the emotion I’d fought so hard to contain threatened to burst free again. Instead, I put my chin up, took a breath, and opened the door to leave.

Cyrus followed me, not letting me far from his side. Once we exited the building, he snagged my hand and led me to his bike. The custom Harley was a thing of beauty. I might not be part of a motorcycle club, but I knew by the way he looked at the bike it was something he took pleasure in. As I stepped close to it, I knew I wanted to be on the back of it. There was no other way to go about it now, I was definitely

riding with him this time, but I wanted to be there permanently. And yeah, I knew what being on the back of a man's bike meant to these guys. It meant I was his. Which would likely never happen. Not with Cyrus. And not only because he was tight with my brother.

I sat stiffly, my fists curling into the leather of his cut. He probably wouldn't like it because a biker's cut was almost sacred to him. Bunching the leather might damage it. It didn't surprise me that Cyrus snagged my wrists and pulled my hands away from the vest. What did surprise me was that he pulled me close, urging me to wrap my arms around his waist. The next thing I knew, I pressed the side of my face against his back and flattened my palms against his chest and abdomen. My fingers were splayed wide, wanting to touch every part of him I could. He grunted at me. Approval? Then he started the bike and took off.

We rode for a while. I wasn't ready for him to take me back to the compound and I thought he needed time to think about what had happened. Probably how to let me know all that shit about him being the father of my child was to keep me from being embarrassed any more than I already was in front of the doctor.

After an hour, I was getting tired. I wasn't used to long rides on a bike and though the breeze was wonderful, it was still hot out. I never loosened my hold on him. In fact, the second I realized where we were, I bunched my fists in the front of his shirt, the nervousness I'd been trying to hold off kicking in making me tremble. I was pretty sure what was about to happen. Cyrus was going to let me down as easily as he was capable of. He'd tell me he'd get me back to my brother in Florida or something and that would be it. Once he

delivered me to my brother, he'd be out of my life. Again. It shouldn't hurt. It wasn't like he was actually in my life to begin with.

We pulled into the garage and turned off the engine. "Careful of the pipes, darlin'. Don't burn yourself." He got off, but I froze, looking down at the bike helplessly.

"I've never ridden before. I-I don't know what's hot."

"Come here." He stepped close to me and put his arm around my back, his hand under my arm and one under the closest knee. When he lifted, I gasped and put my arms around his neck.

He looked at me, narrowing his gaze as we stood there motionless. I swallowed, not knowing what was wrong other than how I clung to him.

I loosened my arms and he actually growled at me, his grip around me tightening. "Don't."

"I-I... Don't what?"

"Pull away from me. Do *not!*" His voice was harsh, his gaze intense. "Understand?"

"No." I shook my head, tears threatening again. "I don't understand at all!"

He closed his eyes and shook his head, grunting once. Then he practically dropped me. He reached out to grasp my hips to steady me when I sucked in a breath and stumbled.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Shouldn't 'a done that." Then he turned and stalked out of the garage. "Come on." Now he sounded mad. At me?

I knew I needed to follow him, but the last thing I

wanted to do was be anywhere around Cyrus. I needed to hole up in a private space and lick my wounds. I'd been prepared for what the doctor would say, but not for Cyrus to be there, or for him to have already known. Or for him to tell the fucking doctor the baby was his!

“No. I'm just gonna leave. I'm not sure what I came all this way for, but I need to go back home.”

He whipped around, walking back in my direction, advancing on me like an angry wildcat. “You said you didn't have a home, so you're not leaving.”

“I can go back to Florida. Donovan will let me stay with him until I get things fixed.”

“Fixed? What things?” I actually stepped back at the anger in his expression. He closed his eyes, his fists clenched at his side. Taking a deep breath, he shook his head. I was beginning to realize he did that when he was trying to get himself back under control. But why would he be this angry at me?

“My life! Everything got turned topsy-turvy a couple of weeks ago. Then this happened! Why are you angry with me?” I was practically yelling at him, the tears threatening again. I was going to lose it. The only question was if I could get behind closed doors or if the entirety of the compound would be witness to my humiliation.

“I'm not angry with you!” Cyrus raised his voice in proportion to my own. He took another deep breath, giving his head another little shake. “Are you looking to terminate your pregnancy? 'Cause you know this ain't the place.”

“What if I am?”

“Then you need to tell me so I can get Stitches to help me find a safe place for you to have the procedure. Either way we have some things to discuss. Come with me.” It was an order pure and simple. He held his hand out to me, fully expecting me to take it.

“What’s going on with us, Cyrus?”

“Nothing’s going on with us,” he snapped. “Blade’s tryin’ his best to help a kid who’s dying, and I’m taking care of you so he can concentrate.”

If he’d slapped me, I wouldn’t have been hurt as much. “So I’m a responsibility.”

“I didn’t say that. You need someone watchin’ over you and I’m fillin’ in.”

“Well, news flash, asshole! I’m an adult! I can take care of myself. And anyone else who comes along!”

I stormed out of the garage, heading toward the compound. There were several men outside lounging against the building or in chairs on the large patio. Had they heard everything?

Fuck!

I turned abruptly to point a finger at Cyrus, to give him a piece of my mind. He was so hot on my heels, he crashed into me. Again, he enclosed his arms around me. I seemed to be finding myself there a lot. The disturbing thing was, I loved every fucking second of it. But I refused to be a charity case, either financially or emotionally.

“I hate you! You bring me here when you know I’m struggling to hold it together and attack me! Demanding to

know my plans when they're none of your business! And why in the hell would you tell the doctor you're the father of this baby?"

"Not now, Odette." His words were quiet but sharp. "We're fixin' to talk about it all once we get inside." He snagged my arm and I jerked away.

"Fuck you!" I screamed at him, tears streaming down my face. "Fuck! You!"

Cyrus's expression was impassive. He gazed at me steadily, calmly. Like he was the fucking reasonable one when he was the one who snapped first.

"You good, Odette?"

I turned to see Stitches approaching. The other men stood in front of the clubhouse seemingly oblivious when I knew they had to be hanging on every word. My commotion must have alerted the rest of the place because several women filed out of the clubhouse, their expressions ranging from curious to outright gleeful.

"No! I'm not good!" And the dam broke.

Great sobs racked my body as I lost all the control I'd fought so hard to retain. I'd almost made it, too. Had I just kept my mouth shut and followed Cyrus inside, I could have kept all this to myself. Instead, everything — shock, grief, fear, longing — all of it came rushing at me with the force and speed of a bullet train. I was eighteen, pregnant, and I had no place to live. No job. No way to survive on my own. I couldn't ask my brother for help because he didn't know about any of my situation, and I didn't want him to.

"Shh... shh..." Strong arms surrounded me, and I

clung to the warm body pulling me against it. “I gotcha, honey. I gotcha.”

“It all hit her?”

“Yeah. I ain’t good at expressin’ myself either.” That was Cyrus. He was the man who had me. I could feel his chin resting on the top of my head, moving back and forth soothingly. Then his lips as he kissed my hair. I adjusted my grip tighter around his neck, putting myself closer against him. It was the worst possible thing I could do but I couldn’t stop myself. I buried my face in his neck and sobbed like a little baby.

“Get her to your room, Cyrus. I’ll get her something to calm her down.”

“She’ll be fine. If I need you, I’ll text. She just needs some breathing room and time to process.”

“You get tired of the little crybaby, Cyrus, you come see me. Jezlynn’ll take care of you.”

I stiffened, pushing away from Cyrus until he set me down on my feet. I turned to the woman who’d spoke. It wasn’t hard to figure out which one it was. She was front and center, clinging to Cyrus’s arm the second he put me down.

“You want him, bitch?” I tilted my head as I studied her. “Well? Do you?”

Jezlynn glanced up at Cyrus who was impassive, then around at the other men surrounding us. One woman giggled, and I thought I heard whispers but couldn’t understand what they said.

“Oh, I’ve had him, little mouse. Several times. I just

want to have him again.” She gave me a superior smirk, putting her shoulders back and thrusting her breasts. “And again... and again... and again.”

I wish I could say I thought really hard about what I did next, but the fact was, I was completely out of control. I threw a punch, putting all my weight behind it. Right in Jezlynn’s left tit.

The other woman screamed, stepping away from Cyrus and clutching her arms to her chest. “You bitch!”

“You ain’t seen bitch yet.” Somehow, my voice was as low and deadly as any badass in any biker compound. It was the same tone of voice my brother, Donovan, had used on the prospect who’d tried to sneak me into the Salvation’s Bane compound two years ago.

Jezlynn looked from Cyrus to Stitches. There were other men around us, but I wasn’t sure of their names. Other than those two men, I hadn’t met the others. I’d seen a few of them, but when I’d made a mad dash out of the compound earlier, I had done my best to keep my head down.

“You guys gonna let her get away with that?” Jezlynn whined. Bitch. “She’s not part of Iron Tzars!” The other woman stuck her chin up, though she still held her tit. “I am!”

“You get to live because I haven’t put out the word Odette’s with me yet. Now you know. Next time you fuckin’ touch her or even look at her the wrong way, I’ll slit your throat myself.”

I blinked up at Cyrus. Though his voice was calm, his gaze was hard. I knew these men were hard asses. I’d heard Donovan say it more than once of the men in Iron Tzars. They

were relatively new to Salvation's Bane, only since they'd formed an alliance with Bones in Kentucky and their former president had been recruited by Black Reign. I didn't know the particulars, but I'd heard their recruitment wasn't necessarily a request for Warlock to join. It had been a demand. I saw it now. The men Donovan saw when he looked at them.

Jezlynn gasped and took a step back. Was she really frightened of Cyrus? Surely, she knew he'd never hurt a woman. That wasn't who he was. Was it? 'Course, I'd only met him once, but that was the image I'd built up in my mind. Cyrus as a protector. Not someone who hurt women and children.

"I suggest you take the other women and be someplace else." Another man moved forward, stepping slightly between Cyrus and Jezlynn.

"She's not one of us! Why are so many women invading our space?" She waved a hand at the other woman behind us. "They're all too scared to say anything, but they think so too! We're part of Tzars! All these women you've brought in from the outside don't belong!"

"Wylde, reach out to another Tzars chapter." I didn't know the man speaking, but everyone looked at him when he spoke. "See if you can find a club who'll take her."

"What?" Jezlynn looked shocked, then angry. "You can't kick me out, Sting!"

"I'm not. I'm getting you transferred. The only reason I'm sending you away instead of ending you is because you've proven loyal to the club for the years you've been here."

"I was here first, Goddamnit!" Jezlynn screamed.

“Even before you became a full member, Sting!”

“Yes. You were. Before you became a club whore, you were a lost girl on the streets. Tzars took you in. Thing is, there are very, very few members of any Tzars chapter who were born into the club. Everyone was an outsider at some point. Our women belong here.”

“But she’s not Cyrus’s woman! She’s not got her tat or property patch! She’s just a girl who got knocked up, then got drunk! Just because she’s *with* Cyrus” — she made air quotes around the word *with* — “doesn’t mean she’s his old lady!”

“He has the right to explore that option if he wishes. Seems like that’s exactly what he’s doin’. You don’t get a say in this or anything else. You’re part of this club, but you ain’t a patched member. Go back to your room and stay there until we figure out where we’re sendin’ you.”

Jezlynn shot me a murderous look, but I bared my teeth at her. Maybe if I was a big enough bitch, they’d send me away too.

“You ain’t gettin’ sent away, so don’t think you can act out enough that you will.” Sting said before turning to me. There was no doubt he was talking to me. I didn’t insult him by pretending I thought he wasn’t. “You’ve had a rough day, Odette. That will only get you so far. My suggestion is for you to swallow your pride and let Cyrus take you up to his room. Stitches says you need food, water, and a ton of sleep. Get all three and you’ll feel more like talking things over with Cyrus.”

“I’m not his responsibility,” I said, trying to keep a rein on both my temper and my tears. “I’m my own person.”

“Yes. You are. But Cyrus needs this. The man doesn’t

ask for much. Frankly, he's never shown any kind of long-term interest in a woman before. As far as I'm concerned, he's gettin' what he wants. That's you."

"What?" I looked from Sting to Cyrus and back. "He doesn't want me. He's looking out for me until my brother isn't too busy to come get me. Even he said so!"

"Yeah?" Sting raised an eyebrow. "Tell yourself that as long as you need to." He jerked his head toward the clubhouse. "I believe you guys have some things to work out, Cyrus."

"We do."

"Make sure she understands everything."

"I may need some help from Wylde with a... project."

Sting smirked. "Yeah. Didn't see that one coming. Give him a name. I'm sure he can track the son of a bitch down. When you're ready, we'll bring the bastard to you."

"Who are you talking about?" I had to know. "My brother?" Had I brought danger to my brother's door? But hadn't Cyrus said they were friends?

"No, lil' bit." Cyrus stepped close to me and, before I realized what he was doing, he scooped me back up into his arms. "Not your brother." He carried me toward the clubhouse.

"Then who?"

"We'll talk about it later. Right now, Sting's right. You need food, water, and care. That first. Then we'll talk."

My emotional outbursts had taken a toll on me. With the adrenaline letdown from the confrontation with Jezlynn, I was weak and shaky. Combine that with all the other emotional turmoil today and I was zonked.

I wrapped my arms around Cyrus's neck and buried my face in his neck. "I'm so sorry, Cyrus. I don't know why I'm such a bitch."

"You're not, honey. You're pregnant. It happens."

I blinked, then pulled back to look at him. "What?"

One side of his lips quirked upward. "Hormones, honey. Hormones."

Had that revelation not just knocked me on my ass I might have slapped his too handsome face. I hadn't even considered the emotional rollercoaster pregnancy might put me on. Instead, I sighed and snuggled into him. I had no idea how long this would last, but Goddamnit, I deserved to have a couple minutes in my fantasy. I'd deal with the repercussions to my self-esteem later. Right now, I wanted to be taken care of by Cyrus. I wanted my dream.

I wanted... *Cyrus*.

Chapter Five

Odette

Cyrus carried me through the common room to the back and up the stairs back to his room. We met more than a few club whores, as they called them, along the way. Most ignored or avoided us. A couple sneered at me, as if they were better than me. Which pissed me the fuck off!

“Retract the claws, lil’ bit. Ain’t nobody encroachin’ on your territory.”

“My territory?”

We reached the door to his room. He fumbled to open it but for some reason refused to set me down. Once we were inside, he kicked the door shut and locked it. All the while, I remained in his arms.

“Yeah. Your territory.”

I studied him, my eyes narrowing. “And what exactly does that mean? I don’t have my own space here.”

“Nope. I’m referring to me. I’m your territory. They ain’t tryin’ to take me from you.”

“Now, wait just a Goddamned minute, Cyrus. I never said you were mine. Or even that I wanted you, for that matter.”

“You didn’t have to.” He crossed to the bed and sat down with me now in his lap. “I said it for you.”

“Why are you doing this? What’s going on that I don’t

know about? I don't want to be anyone's responsibility, least of all yours!"

He shrugged. "A lot of things. The only thing you need to be concerned about right now is how to get along with me. Believe me. That's enough to keep you occupied for a very long while. And just so you know? I don't view you as a responsibility. It's my privilege to be here for you."

Cyrus brushed a tendril of hair off my forehead. It was an intimate, tender gesture. One I never would have guessed the man capable of. When I thought about it, I had to wonder why I'd seized on him in the first place. I'd known from that brief time at Salvation's Bane when he'd carried me over his shoulder kicking and screaming back to my brother that he was gruff and unbending. When he talked to Donovan, he was every bit the hard-ass. I hadn't seen this side of him before, and I got the feeling not many people had.

"You didn't answer my question. Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? Holding you in my lap?"

"Taking care of me. Telling the doctor you were my husband. Bringing me to your room. Is it because of how you found me last night? Because I promise I won't be doing that again. It was stupid, but I needed..." I trailed off, not sure how to express myself.

"To find oblivion? A way to escape everything for a little while?" When I nodded, he smiled gently. "I get it, lil' bit. But you're right. You won't be doing it again. Not while I'm alive."

"Cyrus —"

“No, Odette. I’m serious.” He shifted his grip and turned me to face him, straddling his hips. My knees were on the bed beside him, my hands on his shoulders to balance myself. Cyrus pulled me down so that I sat fully on him. When I felt his cock twitch beneath my pussy, I sucked in a breath.

“Oh, God,” I breathed.

“Hush, lil’ bit. Listen to me.” He put both his hands on my face, framing it as he gazed at me. “What happens with this baby is your choice. I’ll be here to support you no matter what. But there are some things you need to accept and understand.” He waited until I nodded slightly. My breath came quicker and I had to bite my cheek to keep from whimpering. “First, you’re gonna tell me why you came to Evansville. Second, I want you to let me help you figure out what you’re going to do.”

“You said it was my choice.”

“It is, baby. Completely your choice. But no matter what you choose, you’re gonna need someone in your corner helpin’ you. That’s me. You tell me what you want, and I’ll make it a reality. No matter what it is. Understand?”

“Not really.”

“Then let me spell this part out right now. You’re with me now, Odette. We’re a couple. You’re gonna be my old lady and stay here with me. I’ll deal with your brother, but this is a done thing. You just need to tell Sting you’re good with it, and Wylde will take care of everything else.”

I barked out a laugh. “Sounds like you’re ordering me to marry you, or something.”

“Ain’t askin’ and takin’ the chance you’ll say no. I

already tried to bully Wylde into filin' the paperwork to make us legally married, but he refused until Sting gave him the go-ahead. I don't like the word 'no', so I avoid it any way I can."

"How convenient. For you." I couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips. Inappropriate as it was, the man was just too cute for words. Beneath that gruff exterior was a man who was slightly insecure. At least with his feelings. Which, I was sure, he'd never admit.

"I like the path of least resistance. Easier for everyone."

"That it?"

"Nope. You're also gonna tell me what son of a bitch knocked you up, then let you leave."

"I don't think that's your business, Cyrus." I shrugged. "It's over between me and him. Not sure there was ever really anything to begin with."

"He part of Salvation's Bane?"

My laugh sounded bitter even to my own ears. "No. If he was, things would have been different. Donovan would have seen to it."

"You want the guy back?" Though his question sounded harsh, I thought there was a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. I had to really think about this one.

Cyrus was a conundrum. I'd heard my brother say more than once the man didn't get other people's emotions. That he had a form of autism called Asperger's Syndrome or something. I didn't understand it all, but the basic gist was that he didn't always understand other people's emotions and how

he might affect them. Also, he had trouble figuring out his own emotions. He didn't like change and he liked things strictly regimented. So far I hadn't seen much of those traits, but he did seem to be hyper-focused on me for some reason. It was definitely something I needed to look into if I intended on letting him into my life.

“No. Not even a little, Cyrus.”

He relaxed, but his facial expression didn't change. “Good. ‘Cause it ain't happening. Not even if you want it.”

“But you said whatever I wanted you'd make happen.”

“Don't twist my words, girl. That was with regard to the baby. This is something I absolutely will not budge on. He had his chance. You're gonna tell me what happened, but no matter what, he couldn't keep you. Now it's my turn.”

“I can't pretend a relationship with you isn't something I want, so I'm not even going to try.”

“Good. We'll settle that with Sting when we're done here.”

“You do realize we've just met. I mean, in any meaningful way. Last time I remember hanging upside down while you lectured me all the way to my brother's office. While I got a great view of your ass, the conversation wasn't very meaningful.”

“Yeah? Tell me why you came to Evansville instead of taking your problem to your brother for help with it?”

I swallowed. Yeah. He had me there. “Look. I admit it's a bit childish, but you made an impression on me.” I couldn't believe I was about to say this. Even admitting it to

myself was embarrassing. It sounded like a schoolgirl crush even to myself. “I guess I fixated on you. I had no intention of seeking you out, but when I got in my car and started driving, this is where I ended up. I never would have bothered you with my fucked-up life.”

“So? I found you. Now that I have, what did you hope would happen?”

“In reality? Nothing.”

“Ain’t talkin’ about reality, lil’ bit. When you thought about findin’ me, what did you want to happen?”

I closed my eyes and took a breath. “I wanted you to take over. To tell me what to do and how to fix everything.” I knew I sounded weak and helpless, but it was the truth. And for some stupid reason, I wanted to give this man the truth. No matter how much it embarrassed me.

“OK. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

I shook my head. “I can’t let you. This is my mess.”

“And I’m making it mine. You didn’t ask me. I volunteered.”

“You’ve asked me all kinds of questions. Now I want to ask you one.” He opened his mouth, probably to tell me I had to wait until I’d answered all of his, but I refused to go on until I had my answer. “Why, Cyrus? Why would you volunteer to take all this on?”

“Because you need help.”

“You can turn me over to my brother. He’ll help me.”

“No, Odette!” His anger was palpable. Quick and hot. He didn’t like that idea one bit. Curious. “You’re not getting

help from your brother unless he's a resource we use. I'm gonna be the one to take care of you."

"By all accounts, you don't play nice with others. You don't like people in your space, and you like a strictly regimented existence. Just so you know, I'm a chaotic mess. Literally. My place used to look like a whirlwind went through it. Drove Steve crazy."

"Steve the man who got you pregnant?"

I winced. Yeah. Hadn't meant to give that away. "If I say no, will you forget you ever heard that name?"

"Nothing wrong with my memory, honey. Last name."

"Why?"

"Look. If you're going to keep the baby, he's going to sign away his rights so I can claim the child. Also, I'm not going to have you constantly worrying he'll figure it out and try to come after you for money or some shit by threatening to take the baby away. I'll find it out one way or another. Wyldie will be upset if he finds out you could have told him everything up front and he had to go digging anyway."

"Fine. Steve Gleeson's his name. He's fifteen years older than me, and I had no clue he was married. He said he was widowed."

Cyrus's gaze pinned me. "Must have been convincing."

"I fell for a classic con. He claimed to love me, but there was always a reason he couldn't take me out in public with him. I was only with him for a couple of months before I finally figured it out." I sighed. "OK, so I didn't exactly figure it out. I happened to run into him and his wife. And their two

young kids.”

“When was this?”

“Three days before I got here. Two days after I found out I might be pregnant.” I closed my eyes, wanting to cuddle into Cyrus but not sure I had the right. Or that he’d want me to take comfort in him after hearing this. “You have no idea how hard it is to admit what I did. I slept with a married man. Got pregnant with his child.”

“You said he told you his wife was dead.”

“He did, but I should have known.”

“How? How were you supposed to have known he was lying to you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Because there was no way for you to know. You were with him two months?”

“Yes.”

“I take it he doesn’t know about the baby.”

“I didn’t even know for sure until today, Cyrus. I saw them at a movie theater. He saw me and the second he met my gaze, I knew. I was going to leave but decided that no, I was there to watch a picture I’d been wanting to see for months. I wasn’t letting him run me off. So, I bought my ticket and went to stand in line for concessions. I tried not to watch them. I tried so hard, but it hurt. More that I’d been played than from the loss of him, but it still hurt. As I was headed into the theater, he met me in the hall. Accused me of following him and told me his wife would never believe a little whore like me if I tried to tell her he was fucking me. He said I wasn’t getting

one cent of his money, no matter what I threatened, but I swear, Cyrus. I didn't threaten to tell his wife or break up his happy home in any way. I don't know anything about any money he has, and if I did I wouldn't want it. I wasn't even going to confront him at all. If I'd told him I was pregnant, not only would he not have believed me, he'd have blamed me."

"Why didn't you insist on protection?" All his questions were asked matter-of-factly. Like he could care less what the answers were, but his intense gaze said otherwise. He was extremely interested in my answers.

"I did. He was my..." I winced, unable to finish that sentence.

"Your... what? Tell me, Odette."

"The first guy I ever had sex with."

Cyrus took several breaths. His hands had slid down my body to rest on the tops of my thighs. Given the way the muscle in his jaw ticked, I expected his grip on my legs to tighten painfully. Instead, he simply slid his palms up and down my bare legs in a soothing gesture. It was funny how much he calmed me while fighting his own internal war.

"He know that?"

"Yeah. He used a condom the first few times we had sex, but made no secret he wanted to take me without it. I always said no, but one time, he pulled it off before we had sex. I thought it felt different but didn't know until afterward."

"Did you confront him?"

"I was shocked. He just laughed and told me not to worry, he was clean."

“He know you weren’t on birth control?”

I nodded my head. “I don’t think he cared. Looking back, I’m pretty sure it was all a power thing.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it.”

We were silent for a long time. Just staring at each other. My hands still rested on his shoulders, though I occasionally moved my hand to toy with the hair at the back of his neck. I couldn’t seem to stop touching him. I wanted the right to explore every inch of him. The heavy muscles of his shoulders and arms tempted me in ways I couldn’t even begin to process.

“Now what?” I asked softly.

“Now you get what you came for. I’m takin’ over and helping you through this. You’re in the six-week window if you want an abortion, but you’ll need to tell me now if that’s what you want. I’ll probably have to get Wylde and Stitches both to pull some strings to make it happen in Indiana fast enough to accommodate you, but we can do it.”

I frowned, thinking seriously about it for the first time. Did I want an abortion? “No,” I sighed. “I don’t want to do that. Not really.”

“Good. Next thing is to make you my old lady and my wife. Easily done. Wylde probably has everything ready to go. He’s just waiting on the OK from Sting. You just have to tell him that’s what you want.” He hesitated, looking at me almost guiltily. “There are a couple things you need to know, though. Not that it will make a difference. You’re still mine. I don’t give up what’s mine.”

“That’s not cryptic or anything. Tell me.”

“When a Tzar takes an old lady, she has to get inked with her man’s property patch. You can see the other old ladies’ tats to get an idea. They’re each unique to the woman, and the men have all adopted the practice of getting a matching tat on their left ring finger.”

“Like a wedding band or something?”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

“That actually sounds rather sweet. But what happens if they get divorced?”

“That’s the second thing. There is no divorce in our club.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“We’re not like Salvation’s Bane or Bones, or even Black Reign. Iron Tzars do things we don’t want to get out. To anyone. We have our own code we live by, but we’re not always on the right side of the law.”

“No surprise there. Neither is Bane.”

“Compared to us, they are. This club has a rich tradition of righting wrongs, no matter the cost. We don’t hurt innocents, and we always make sure of what we’re doing so there are no mistakes. The reason for the no-divorce rule is that men talk to their women and vice versa. In all the years since Iron Tzars have been in existence, we’ve never had a secret get out of our gates. That’s because every person affiliated with us from patched member to prospect, or old lady to club whore is completely loyal to us. They don’t leave.”

“Sting just sent Jezlynn away.”

“He’s sending her to a different chapter. We have them all over the country. All over the world, really. As long as there isn’t a loyalty problem, all the chapters work together to make sure all our members and women have a home in one of our chapters.” There was something he was leaving out, and I wasn’t really sure I wanted to know it all. Still, my big mouth opened and out it came.

“As long as there isn’t a loyalty problem. What exactly does that mean?”

Did I imagine he winced? “If someone inside is disloyal to the club, if they breach our trust or try to leave once they’ve been privy to any of our secrets, they’re dealt with by the club. Permanently.”

It took a minute for that to sink in. When it did, I found myself shaking my head. “I don’t think I want to be part of that, Cyrus.”

“Why not? It’s not like you’re leaving, and I don’t believe for a minute you’d betray me or the club.”

I tried to get off his lap, but he slid his hands around to grip my ass and pull me back. “Let me up, Cyrus.”

“Not happening,” he growled. “You sit here with me, and we work this out. This is how it works.”

“You’re talking about having me killed if I try to leave you! Cyrus, we’ve known each other less than a day! What the fuck?”

His chin jutted up. “You sayin’ I can’t keep you satisfied?”

“I’m saying we don’t even know if we like each other!

Hell, half the time I'm with you I want to kick you in the balls!"

"And the other half?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Cyrus —"

"No, Odette. We have chemistry."

"Sure. I feel safe with you. You're the sexiest man I've ever met. You're over the top protective. But you're also a complete asshole without even trying."

There it was. That flash of vulnerability I'd had a glimpse of a couple of times.

"I know I'm different. I don't always understand how my words or actions affect other people's emotions. Hell, half the time I don't understand my own, but I know without a doubt I want you with me."

"My brother said you had Asperger's Syndrome."

He shrugged. "Yeah. It's not a bad form of it, and I can mostly control myself. But I still have problems relating to others. Usually when I don't want to relate to them."

I couldn't help but grin. "I take it you don't want to most of the time."

"Maybe. Ain't ever met someone I felt a need to relate to. Until the first time I saw you." Cyrus didn't have many expressions and the ones he did were very subtle. Just in the time I'd known him, though, I was noticing a few. He was telling me the truth. On all counts.

"You realize I'm way younger than you. Right? At least a good ten years."

“Yep. Still want you, Odette. Don’t think you’re gonna talk your way out of this. You’re not. It’s only a matter of time until I convince you to go all in with me. That doesn’t change the fact that you’re still gonna be my old lady.”

“You don’t love me, Cyrus,” I said softly. “I can’t marry a man who doesn’t love me.”

I knew the second I said the words it was a mistake. “But you love me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t *not* say it either. You said you couldn’t marry a man who didn’t love you. That implies you’d have to love him too. It also implies that you love me since you didn’t specify you’d have to love me to marry me.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re damned frustrating?”

“All the damned time, baby.”

“I don’t love you. But I could see myself loving you given enough time.”

He studied me before shaking his head. “I can’t tell if you’re lying or not. I’m going with not since this is moving faster than you’re comfortable with.”

“What about you? Could you see yourself loving me?”

For the first time since I’d met him, Cyrus didn’t have an answer. In fact, he looked confused as all get out. Like he didn’t understand the question.

“I’m not sure.”

“Ouch.”

“No,” he said hastily. “That’s not what I mean. I’m not

sure, you know, what that is.” He cleared his throat, looking away. Embarrassed? “Love.”

“I’m surprised you’d admit that.”

“I’ll never keep things from you, Odette. I want to give you what you need. I’m just not sure how with this.”

“Then we should slow down.”

Immediately he got that stubborn mien that secretly made me smile. “We’re not slowing down. This is happening.”

I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. Seriously. The man was like a kid with a new toy he absolutely refused to give up.

“This isn’t a decision I can make on the fly.”

“Like I said. There’s no decision for you to make. You wanted me to take over? That’s what I’m doing.”

“Life or death, Cyrus. That means this is one thing you’re not taking over. Not yet. What if you abuse me? Mentally or physically. What if you cheat? What if I wake up one morning and realize that I simply go, ‘God, I can’t stand the fact that you have to have everything in the house just so, and it’s making me crazy that I can’t leave my dirty underwear on the bathroom floor for more than the fifteen minutes it takes me to shower?’ What if I can’t stand living with you because you’re stubborn and need to control everything around you, because I can see both those traits coming out in spades right now.”

“I hurt you in any way, but especially if I hit you or berate you or humiliate you or any other of a million things a person could do to mentally abuse someone, you go to Sting or any member of the Iron Tzars. Or any of the old ladies. Sting

will deal with me and the whole club will protect you. If I ever hit you, my life will be forfeit. No questions asked.”

“That gives me a lot of power.”

“It does. But if you were the kind of person to have me killed in cold blood, I wouldn’t want you with me.”

“Again, Cyrus. You don’t know me. Which is my whole point here. Twenty-four hours isn’t nearly enough time.”

“It is for me. If you’d let yourself turn off your brain and act on instinct, I think you’d realize it’s enough time for you too.”

Chapter Six

Cyrus

What the everlasting fuck was I thinking? Taking Odette as my old lady? She needed someone to protect her. To protect her baby — assuming she decided to keep it. I was the best protector she could find, which was why I volunteered.

I could keep her and the baby safe. From every-fucking-body. And when I found that asshole who'd played her, then knocked her up, I was gonna make it so he never did it to another young woman ever again. Assuming I let him live.

Yes. That was my plan. I was committing to taking care of a friend's sister and her child. I might never be able to give her the love she probably needed, but I could give her a stable home, a faithful man, and as much pleasure as she wanted.

Which brought up another question. Had that bastard who'd lied to her made her feel good?

Yeah. No. Wasn't touching that. I got a pain in my chest thinking about her with someone else. Not happening again. She was mine.

The moment the thought entered my mind, I knew I meant it. I might not deal well with emotions, but I knew what I wanted. This possessiveness was something new. I'd never been possessive over anything other than, perhaps, my bike. What I felt for Odette surpassed anything I had even felt

before. I'd say it bordered on the obsessive, but it went way beyond that. I'd passed obsessive a long damn time ago. I was in the realm of stalker but wasn't about to back off.

"I'm not saying you're right, Cyrus, but yeah. I feel safe with you. I know you'd never intentionally hurt me. How do I know that?" She gave a little chuckle. "No fucking clue. I just can't believe my brother would be close with someone who wasn't a good person."

"At the risk of cutting my own throat, don't kid yourself. I'm not a nice man, Odette. But I will protect you with my life and do everything in my power to make you happy."

She was still straddling my lap. My cock was a living thing between us. There was no way she could fail to notice it, but she only stiffened once — when I first positioned her over me.

"You need food and rest," I said, not wanting to let her out of my arms but knowing I couldn't keep her with me like this forever. "You want a shower while I round you up something?"

"Yeah. I think that'd be nice."

"Good. I think the women got you some bathroom stuff, and I had a couple prospects retrieve your things from the crappy hotel you were staying at." If there was disapproval in my voice, it was deserved. The place she was staying at was in a bad part of town and probably had rodents and insects scurrying around.

"It was what I could comfortably afford for the longest amount of time."

“No excuses, Odette. I think that’s three I owe you.”

She gave me a blank look, like she didn’t remember my promise to spank her. “Three what?”

“Spankings. I mean to deliver those the second it’s official that you’re mine.”

“Not a very good incentive for me to tell Sting I agree. Besides, I haven’t done anything to deserve a spanking.” God, she was sexy when she fought me. Didn’t mean she’d get her way about something like this.

“No? You got drunk. In a bar. On your own. What would have happened if my brothers hadn’t dragged my ass there?”

“I’d have been all right.”

I snorted. “You passed out in my arms, Odette. You literally fell into my arms, sniffed me, then passed out.”

“Only because I knew it was you.”

“Little liar. That’s four, by the way.”

“What is it with you and spankings?”

I grinned at her. A genuine grin. I wasn’t sure when the last time I felt the *need* to smile. The sensation didn’t feel as awkward as I thought it might. In fact, with Odette wrapped around me like she was, it felt right. “Maybe I just love your ass.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You do, huh?”

“Oh yeah.” I slid my hands around to squeeze the fleshy globes gently for emphasis. “I certainly do.”

“Even if you do, that’s still only one.”

“Yeah? You lied to me. First in the doctor’s office and then putting yourself in danger by staying at that fleabag motel. Then you lied just now when you said you knew I was the man who had you when you last fell off the stage last night. You were too drunk to know your own name let alone recognize a man you hadn’t seen in two years.” The more I thought about what could have happened last night if I hadn’t been there, the more my chest tightened and it was hard to breathe.

“Cyrus?”

“What!” I snapped at her, not meaning to, but the thought of something happening to her was not sitting well with me.

She blinked several times, her gaze not leaving mine. Then her features softened. “I’m fine, Cyrus. Nothing happened to me. You saved me.”

“Damned straight I did,” I muttered, clearing my throat. “And you’ll never do anything like that again. You want to get drunk, you do it with me watching over you.”

“That was the only time I’ve ever done anything like that. I knew what I was doing, yet I guess I didn’t, all at the same time.”

We stared at each other a long moment. The band tightening around my chest eased somewhat and I could breathe a little easier. Odette brought her small hand to my cheek and stroked my beard in a soothing gesture.

“I really am OK, you know.”

“And I intend to keep you that way.”

She hesitated a second, then leaned in and brushed her lips over mine tentatively. The second she did, my world exploded.

In my lifetime, I'd kissed a few women. Most of them were in my younger days before I decided I really didn't like the act of kissing. It was too intimate, and I didn't like intimacy. Intimacy implied something more than just sex. Since I first became self-aware, I knew I wasn't like other people. I didn't have the same reactions to certain situations as other people. Even anger was usually over other people's stupidity or frustration when I couldn't make someone understand me. Not at a situation itself. I was fully aware I'd been angry several times over the last day because of the danger and/or disrespect to Odette. And the fact she wouldn't fully commit to me now was another frustration, even if her objections made perfect sense. The animal inside me recognized her as mine and wasn't taking no for an answer.

Now, with her lips pressed to mine, another emotion I wasn't acquainted with shot through me. Lust, hard and mean, punched through me like a dagger to the heart. I was done. God help anyone who came between me and Odette because she was fucking *mine*.

I wrapped my arms around her tightly, holding her against me as I deepened the kiss. Sweeping my tongue into her mouth, I took her taste inside me, reveling in the fact that I'd get to taste those delectable lips anytime I wanted.

She moaned, opening her mouth, letting me take what I had to have. The problem was, the more I had, the more I wanted. She was like a drug. Potent and addictive. If that were true, I wanted to keep my addiction because Odette was

providing the sweetest, most wonderful sensations I'd ever experienced.

I pulled her closer to me so my cock was mashed against her between her legs. The heat of her through her shorts was scorching, her pussy already wanting something she wasn't ready for mentally or emotionally. She was right that she needed more time. I was sure she was still feeling the effects of what Steve Gleeson had put her through. I didn't in any way want her to equate what that man had taken from her with me.

"Cyrus..." My whispered name on her lips only made me more possessive of her. I growled as I continued to kiss her, moving her over the ridge of my cock in a steady rhythm. "What is this?" She shivered, moving her hips faster and faster as she rubbed over my cock.

"Feel good?"

"Oh, God! Yes! Help me!"

I scooted us back on the bed and rolled so she was underneath me. Odette tightened her legs around me, lifting herself to me while I situated us. She wasn't passive by any measure. Odette thrust her hips at me, rocking over my cock in a maddening glide that threatened to unman me. And there was no way that was fucking happening. At least, not until she came. After that all bets were off.

"Take what you need, Odette," I growled. Sweat dotted her skin and I couldn't help but put my face in her neck and lick.

Odette squealed and stiffened. Then she screamed. I felt her pussy quivering against my cock as she came, the thin

shorts she wore not an adequate buffer between us. As much as I wanted to follow her, I decided in that moment I would not come until I was deep inside her. Then I'd fill her so full she'd never forget who she belonged to.

I let her ride out her pleasure while I kissed and nipped the skin of her neck and shoulder. I wanted to strip her bare and continue what we'd started, but I didn't think now was the right time. Soon. But not now.

When she stopped moving, I pulled back to look at her. There was a bemused smile on her face and a dazed look in her eyes.

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Haven't you ever orgasmed before?”

“I thought I had.” She shook her head. “I'm rethinking that assessment.”

I barked out a startled laugh. “There's much, much more where that came from, lil' bit. I'll take you down that road as many times as you'll let me.”

She laid a hand on the side of my face before pulling me back to her for another kiss. I could get lost in those kisses and never find my way out.

“Thank you, Cyrus. I'll never forget this moment.”

“Damn straight you'll never forget it.” I gave her a hard kiss before pushing myself off her. I snagged her hand and pulled her up. “Go take a shower. I'll bring back something to eat, then you can rest.”

She gave me a shy look, like she was unsure of herself. “Will you stay with me? I-I mean, for a little while?”

“Honey, I’ll stay as long as you want me.”

With a nod, Odette turned and went into the bathroom.

I stood there a long while, debating on whether or not to follow her and shower with her but thought better of it. She needed care. Not a horny biker trying to fuck her. That could come later. After all, we had all the time in the world.

* * *

Odette

I took my time in the shower to get my wits back. I’d give Cyrus one thing. He certainly knew what he was doing with regard to sex. Steve had been my first sexual partner. While I’d never orgasmed with him during sex, I’d experimented playing with myself using porn videos on my phone as a guide. I’d found some pleasure this way. But nothing like what had just happened.

As I thought about it while warm water cascaded over me, my knees trembled and I shivered. My pussy clenched, wanting to be filled. I ached with need even though I’d orgasmed not ten minutes before.

If there was anyone who knew better than to surrender to a man because he showed a physical interest, it was me. Yet, I found myself doing just that. I wanted what Cyrus was offering. Wanted to be his woman. His wife. I wasn’t sure about the whole not being able to leave thing, but that concern didn’t really seem important. If Cyrus kept me happy, if he took care of me like he’d been doing the last day, I knew I’d never want to leave.

Then there was my brother. That was the one thought

that finally sobered me. Donovan was going to be furious. With this whole situation. Even though me and Cyrus had talked about him several times, when he found out where I was and why I was here, he was going to lose his mind. I might well get that spanking Cyrus threatened. Not only had I not told him I was in trouble, but I'd taken off on my own without telling him where I was going.

I didn't live with my brother or anywhere near the Salvation's Bane compound, but he always checked on me. Every single day. I'd been gone for two weeks. I answered his calls but always gave him some song and dance about where I was. He wasn't nosy and all in my business, so as long as I answered my phone, he didn't push. To say he wasn't going to be happy with me was a vast understatement.

With a sigh, I turned off the water and grabbed a towel. I dried and dressed before brushing out my hair and exiting the bathroom. When I did, Cyrus stood from where he sat at the small table in his room. He had a plate of green beans, corn, mashed potatoes, and a pork chop waiting on me. His chin was up, but he looked uncomfortable.

"I wasn't sure what you liked, but Stitches said this would be healthy for you." Was he nervous about what he'd brought me to eat? I was beginning to realize Cyrus was doing his best to get this right. He was determined to get this right and wasn't sure how to go about it. I could tell by how his normal confidence was absent. He seemed unsure of himself. He was born for the role of protector, but trying to be a nurturer. I thought it was adorable. Not that I'd ever tell him that. That would definitely get my ass spanked.

"Thank you. I'm sure it's delicious."

“Blaze made it. Said it wasn’t much, but it was quick. Said not to hold it against him.”

I smiled as I took a seat at the table. “Please thank him for his hard work.”

He nodded as I dug in.

Ambrosia!

Who’d have thought such a simple meal could be so freaking *good*? The corn and potatoes were rich and buttery, the pork chop tender and perfectly cooked, the flavor strong. The beans went perfectly with the combination, though I wasn’t overly fond of green beans. It all was so delicious I couldn’t seem to stop eating. Before I knew it, I’d cleaned my plate and glanced around for more. I hadn’t even noticed the glass of milk sitting beside my plate. The second I did, I drank it down.

I realized I probably looked like a crazy person, wolfing down my food like I was starved. When I looked over at Cyrus, he was grinning from ear to ear. It was a strange but good look on him. One I hoped to see on him often because of something I’d done to put it there.

Was this love? I didn’t know. My parents had died three years ago in a boating accident. It was part of the reason I’d tried to sneak into the Bane compound with that prospect two years before. It was a rebellion of sorts. A need to be noticed. A cry for attention. I missed them both terribly. It was an aching wound I was sure would never heal. I wanted to fill that void with someone else. The prospect hadn’t been that person, but I thought Cyrus might be.

No. That wasn’t true. He wasn’t a substitute for what

I'd lost. It was why I questioned my feelings for him now. No. What I was starting to feel for Cyrus was vastly different. At least, I thought it was. It was hard to tell because I'd built him up in my mind to be the great love of my life. After Steve, I didn't really trust my judgment anymore.

"I can get you more. Blaze will be happy you want more."

"No. I think I'm good." I smiled at him. "Thank you, Cyrus. For everything. I'm sorry I was such a bitch and gave you such a hard time. You kept me safe and got me medical attention. Both today and last night. I want you to know I appreciate all you did for me."

"You never have to thank me for takin' care of you, honey. I'll always take care of you."

He cleared the dishes while I stood and stretched. Now that I was full, I really wanted that nap. "I've decided the night life isn't for me." I grinned when he gave me a skeptical look. "Really! I'm exhausted."

"Thought you might be. Come on. I'll lie down with you."

I stripped down to my underwear and the T-shirt I was wearing and crawled under the covers. It was only one in the afternoon, but I knew there was no way I could stay awake much longer.

Cyrus lay down beside me and pulled me into his arms. I laid my head on his chest and breathed him in. He was everything I'd ever wanted. Not only was he strong and handsome, but he was caring and protective as hell. I could see myself falling head over heels in love with him. It really

wouldn't take much considering how much I'd fantasized about him.

"Cyrus?" I was so sleepy, my words were slurred, but I needed to get this out before I passed out.

"Yeah, baby."

"Please don't break my heart."

"Never. You'll always be safe with me. Every part of you."

I took a deep breath, then let it out. The last thing I heard was Cyrus's fervent promise. "I'll kill to keep you safe. Body and heart."

Chapter Seven

Cyrus

Relationship shit was hard. Mainly because there was another person I had to let make decisions when I was better suited for it. Odette was as stubborn as I knew she would be. Though I tried to ignore how much of a turn-on it was, every time she stuck that chin up to tell me what for, I got hard as a fucking rock. Which meant I'd spent a lot of time in the shower jerking off because I didn't think she wanted me throwing myself at her. Sure, I'd gotten her off and I slept with her every night and held her when she napped, but that was different.

It had been a week since I'd found her. I'd been in touch with Blade, who'd cheerfully promised to cut off my balls if I fucked his sister. I hadn't yet fucked her, but it was because it wasn't what Odette needed right now. Not because a man named Blade, who was a skilled physician — and almost as big a badass as I was — had promised to castrate me.

“Cyrus?” Odette stood next to me, laying her small hand on my shoulder as she looked up into my face. She was acting more rationally over the past few days. Good food, plenty of water, and lack of alcohol had vastly improved her mood. Well, that and a whole lot of Goddamned sleep. The woman had slept nearly sixteen hours the first couple of days she'd been with me after the doctor had given her that first check-up and confirmed the news that she was pregnant. Now, she was more relaxed. She smiled more. And her moods had

stabilized. Mostly.

“Yeah, baby. Everything OK?”

“Yes! Better than OK.” She gave me a soft smile... only for it to fade. She looked away, biting her lip.

“Don’t say everything’s OK when it’s not, Odette.” I gently grasped her chin and turned her to me. “I thought we were past that.”

“We are. And everything really is fine. It’s just...”

“Tell me what you need. I can’t fix it if I don’t know what it is.”

She gave me an exasperated look. “You know, you could make things sound like less of an order and more like you were concerned and want me to tell you.”

I tilted my head at her, confused. “Why the hell would I do that? You need something, you tell me. That’s your job. You should tell me whether I ask you or not.”

“Cyrus, shut up.”

I blinked. She was smiling so I didn’t think she was irritated at me. More amused from the look of it, though why I had no idea. I did as she told me, not saying a word.

She sighed, letting her hand slide from my face to my chest where she patted it once before settling. “Look. You said we were going to be together. Right?”

“Right.” I gave her one crisp nod. She was getting it and I was proud she was. It meant fewer misunderstandings by everyone.

“So? Are you ever going to have sex with me?” As she

asked her question, she stiffened. “Or do you not want sex to be part of this? I thought with what happened last week —”

“Of course, I want sex to be part of this.” I pulled her into my arms, wrapping a hand around her head to press the side of her face against my chest. I kissed the top of her head and tried to keep my body from reacting to her words. “I want it with every fiber of my fuckin’ being!” The thought of taking her to the bed, stripping her down to her delectable skin, then fucking her senseless gave me a hard-on to beat all hard-ons.

“But you haven’t done anything since that first time. You know. After my meltdown and... altercation with that club girl.”

“No, I haven’t. But I can assure you the shower has been my fuckin’ best friend.”

She pulled back to look up at me. “What?”

“Odette, I want you more than I want my next fuckin’ breath, but I wasn’t sure you were ready for it.”

Her expression softened. “I appreciate you looking out for me, but I’m more than ready, Cyrus.”

“Are you sure? Because I won’t be letting you go once we do this.”

“Oh? So if we don’t have sex, you’ll let me go back to my brother?”

Immediately, I had a visceral reaction to that simple statement. My heart accelerated, my stomach clenched, and a wave of possessive anger at the possibility she’d leave me threatened to have me snapping at her again, like I’d done several times since I’d met her. I wasn’t angry at her. Exactly.

Only at the possibility that she'd leave me. Or that she might want to leave me.

I'd been trying my hardest, damnit! I'd tried to anticipate her needs, to make sure she got enough rest. I'd introduced her to the club's old ladies in hopes they'd ease any fears she had about the situation I was demanding of her. I'd done everything I could to prove to her I'd provide a comfortable, giving environment for her. And there was still a chance she would leave me?

“Never! Fuckin’ never, Odette!”

I pulled her back to me, securing her against my chest. It wasn't until I realized that she was shaking that I let her go, fearing I'd squeezed her too tightly. Or, worse, frightened her. “Odette?”

When she looked up, there was a smile on her face and I almost fell to my knees in relief. And because the sight of this girl smiling was the most glorious thing I'd ever witnessed. Except maybe the look on her face when she came.

She giggled. Actually fucking giggled! “I'm teasing you, Cyrus.”

“Teasing?”

“Yeah. You know. Teasing. Poking fun at you for being so possessive. Playing.”

“Why...” I shook my head, not understanding. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you need to not take everything so seriously. You're an old man. You're gonna give yourself an ulcer — EEK!”

I bent and put my shoulder in her abdomen to heft her up and carry her to the bed. “Playing?” I swatted her ass. “Playing? I’ll show you playing, little girl.”

She let loose a peal of laughter as I tossed her to the bed and whipped off my shirt. Odette was so fucking beautiful it made my chest hurt. Everything about her was sweetness and light to me. Well, except her prickly temper, but I still put it down to hormones. Also, it kind of turned me on, except when it was because I’d done something to really displease her. I didn’t like that at all.

I was so fucked.

She scooted back on the bed, like she was trying to get away from me. So I snagged her ankle and pulled her back before digging my fingers into her sides to tickle her.

Odette squealed and laughed, wiggling beneath me when I covered her small body with my own big one. I buried my face in her neck and blew a raspberry, making her cry out even more.

“Might tickle you till you pee. How’s that for playing, huh?”

We continued that way for another minute or two while I maneuvered her more to the center of the bed before I completely blanketed her body with mine. I tunneled my fingers through her hair and put her head where I wanted it as I stared down at her. She looked up at me, breathless with pink cheeks and a big smile and I... was... done.

I took her mouth in a kiss I’d wanted to be tender and gentle, but the second she thrust her tongue into my mouth to tangle with mine, I lost any control I had along with the ability

to take her slowly this first time.

She moaned, arching her back to thrust her breasts more firmly against my chest. Her legs circled my hips in an attempt to rub against the ridge of my cock. Her nails dug into my shoulders before scoring down my back. The little bite of pain planting her mark of ownership on my body was the biggest turn-on I'd ever experienced. Lust was strong and vicious. Like it always seemed to be when I was around her.

I moved my body to give her the friction she needed, but I wasn't about to let her come yet. Not this time.

“So fuckin’ hot, aren’t you?”

“Are you going to fuck me now?”

“Oh yeah, baby. I’m damned well gonna fuck you. Don’t think this is a one-time thing, though.”

“I certainly hope it’s not a one-time thing.” She grinned.

“I mean it, Odette. This is your commitment to me. I’ll fuckin’ hold you to it.”

“Cyrus —”

“I told you, baby. This is happening. Whether or not we fuck now. I tried to give you time but you went and asked for it, so this is you accepting me. Instead of waiting another week or so, I’m makin’ you mine now. I’ll get your cut and have Ace get ready to do your property tattoo. It’s same as a done thing.”

She actually rolled her eyes at me, but there was still a smile on her face. “How about we table that discussion for after you fuck me?” That perfectly arched eyebrow raising

made my cock ache even worse.

Instead of answering her, I shoved her shirt over her chest to cup her tits through her bra. “Always knew you were trouble.”

“Never said I wasn’t.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about the spankin’ I owe you. Might be time to follow through.”

Was that heat in her eyes? I wasn’t sure. Could be fear, but I didn’t think so. I hoped not. Because my hand was itching to deliver on my promise. And that thought was all I could take.

I shoved her bra over her tits and took one nipple into my mouth. Her breasts were small and exquisite, the nipples long, dusky pink, and absolutely delicious. I rubbed the nub along the roof of my mouth with my tongue while I pinched and twisted the other gently.

“Ahh!” She cried out, holding my head to her chest with her little hands fisted in my hair. I rubbed my beard over her chest as I continued to suck and tease her ripe nipples. Over and over, I alternated between one breast then the other. It didn’t take long for sweat to make her skin a slippery, silky playground for me to explore with my hands, mouth, and the rest of my body. The feel of her smooth skin over my hair roughened chest was the most amazing thing I’d ever felt.

It wasn’t long before she became impatient, shoving me away so she could pull her shirt completely off and shimmy out of her shorts. More than once she almost nailed me in the balls when I refused to move from between her legs as she struggled to get her shorts and panties off. I loved

watching her like this, knowing she was impatient for me to fuck her.

I knelt there between her legs while she gripped my hips and tried to pull me closer. “What are you waiting for? Get your pants off.”

With a smirk, I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket and tossed a condom on the bed beside her. “This is your one shot, Odette. I’ll use a condom until you say otherwise, but once that bridge is crossed, there’s no going back. Get me?”

She cocked her head to the side, her eyes wide. It was a shit move on my part, but I unfastened my jeans slowly, pulling down the zip until my cock sprang free. Letting it bob in front of me to her rapt gaze, I shoved my jeans over my hips slowly.

My cock twitched, practically sniffing for her pussy and the way home. Precum leaked from the tip in a pearly drop she never looked away from. Slowly, she reached out with a tentative finger and ran the tip through the thick fluid, bringing it to her lips like she was in a trance. Then her eyes closed in bliss and she hummed in pleasure.

I didn’t move for a long time, letting her look her fill and touch me however she wanted. Her fingers caressed my cock up and down its length, driving me to madness. Still, I held on. She needed this. To know she could touch me whenever and however she liked. Because I was hers. Same as I’d been telling her she was mine.

When Odette met my gaze, her eyes were glazed over with lust, her lips were parted, and her breath was coming in little pants. I raised an eyebrow and glanced to the condom packet I’d tossed beside her on the bed. She blinked rapidly as

if coming out of a trance.

“I— I’m sorry.”

“Condom or no, baby. Tell me now or I’m making the decision.”

“We probably should...”

“Didn’t ask what we should do, Odette. Asked what you wanted to do.”

Eyes widening and filling with a kind of panic she shook her head. “You choose.”

I nodded and reached for the foil packet. Before I could open it, however, she stayed my fingers with her hand. “No. Wait.” She pulled the condom from my hand and tossed it back to the bed. “Why do I want this with you?”

“Because you know you’re mine.”

Her features hardened and that damned sexy chin went up. “No condom.”

I felt the corner of my lips lift. It was a habit I was developing when she did something I wanted. She didn’t exactly surrender to me so much as she convinced herself the whole thing was her idea to begin with.

“Be very sure, Odette. I meant what I said. No taking this back.”

“Considering we already established the fact that you weren’t letting me go anyway, I don’t think that’s a factor.”

I grunted, lowering myself over her again. I positioned my cock at her pussy entrance but didn’t enter her. Not yet. I needed that extra few seconds to get a firm hold on my

control.

“This first time’s gonna be hard and fast, Odette. Later, I’ll work on gentle and drawing out your pleasure. When I do that, I might just keep you here for hours riding the edge of your orgasm. Days.”

When she gasped out her shock and I felt her pussy twitch against my cockhead, I pressed forward. The second the head entered her I knew I was in trouble. Yeah. This wasn’t going to last long. If I made it beyond a couple shallow thrusts, I’d be damned lucky. For a man who prided himself on his control and claimed to lack emotional connections, I was so far gone in a sea of emotions it obliterated my control.

Burying myself to the hilt, I forced myself to stop. Odette screamed, her pussy contracting around me as she came.

“Fuck me,” I gasped out as sweat coated my body because of my effort to hold off my own climax. Odette wiggled on my cock, thrusting and twisting her hips in an erotic dance. She might be the best actor in the world, but if her reactions weren’t genuine, I couldn’t tell it. I might have trouble with people, but Odette I was getting to know. She had this dazed but blissful look on her face as she took her pleasure. Her cheeks were pink and her lips red where she bit down on the bottom one occasionally. She was, in a word, magnificent.

I gripped the tops of her thighs, moving my hips to surge into her with ever increasing strokes. Then I slid my hands up to her hips and waist. Her eyes went wide in a maniacal grin.

“Yes, Cyrus,” she breathed. “Fuck me hard!”

With a fierce growl, I beard my teeth. “You don’t get to dictate the ride, baby. You’re not in charge.”

She raised herself up on her elbows, looking down at our joined bodies before reaching one hand between us and stroking her clit. “Yeah?”

Her breathing came faster and faster as she circled her fingers over the sensitive nub twice more. Before I could yank her hand away, she came, her sweet little pussy clamping down on my dick like a vise. I yelled just as she screamed, taking me into a bliss I’d never known existed.

* * *

Odette

What the hell had just come over me? Sex had never been like that. I should have been prepared after the one other encounter I’d had with Cyrus. He hadn’t even fucked me then. Now, however, I’d felt like I imagined a nymphomaniac would feel. I was so out of control there was no way I could refrain from taking what I wanted.

And why the fuck had I stopped Cyrus from using a condom? He’d made the choice when I wouldn’t, then I’d stopped him. When Steve had done it before, I’d been horrified. Now all I felt was... peace. I knew why. I was now Cyrus’s. He’d told me that was the final straw and I’d taken that out. The way out of my old life and into a new one with Cyrus in my life.

“Little witch.” Cyrus collapsed over me, his cock still inside me. He kissed my neck and the side of my face before moving to my mouth and gifting me with languid kisses. Like

he was praising me for letting him have me.

“Why would you call me that?”

“Because,” he said between kisses at my neck, “In all the years I’ve been sexually active, ain’t never been a woman could make me lose control like you just did.” He pulled back to smile down at me. It was a lazy, sleepy smile. A well-satisfied smile. “That was the best experience of my fuckin’ life, Odette. And it was all you.”

For Cyrus, that was akin to poetry, and it made me smile. “For me too.” I laid a hand on his face, stroking his beard. I loved the slightly coarse texture, especially when he rubbed it over my chest and nipples. I shivered thinking about it.

He chuckled. “There you go again. Insatiable little witch.”

“I never have been before,” I muttered. “Maybe you’re the one who’s bewitched me.”

With one last kiss, he pushed off me and off the bed. “I guess it’s all just us. Together.” He stood there several seconds just looking at me. My legs were still spread, his seed seeping from my pussy, sweat cooling my body. I was self-conscious and felt my face heat up down my neck to my chest, but I didn’t close my legs or cover my breasts.

His nostrils flared. “Cup your tits, Odette. Play with your nipples.”

I gasped, shocked at the idea. “I’m not doing that.” But my hands crept up to do exactly what he said.

When I started to close my thighs, he shook his head.

“Don’t. Keep your legs spread. Like seeing your pussy filled with my cum.

I groaned and squeezed my breasts. My fingers found my nipples and twisted and tugged to the point of pain. I sucked in a breath as the pain morphed into pleasure as I saw Cyrus’s face fill with a dangerous lust.

“That’s it, baby. Now stroke your pussy. Let me see my cum on your fingers.”

“This is so…”

“Naughty? Sexy?”

“Erotic.” The word was a mere whisper of sound. This play had me nearly as wound up as I was earlier.

Without another thought, I did what he asked. I dipped my fingers into my freshly fucked pussy, coming out with creamy cum on my fingers. I spread them apart to watch in fascination as the viscous fluid clung to my skin.

“Clean them off.” His growl was sexy as fuck. At first, I wasn’t sure what he wanted. I looked around for a tissue or something, but he leaned over me and took my wrist, gently guiding my fingers to my mouth. My eyes widened.

“Never done that before,” I whispered even as I opened my mouth. Cyrus let go of my wrist with my fingers hovering at my lips.

I finished the move, putting my fingers in my mouth and closing my lips around them. His seed was slightly salty but not unpleasant. The act seemed dirty, but erotic. Forbidden. Exciting!

I groaned and sat up, then sank to my knees on the

floor in front of him, gripping his hip in one hand while taking his cock with the other. He stood there with his hands at his sides, the muscles of his abdomen rippling before my gaze even as his cock hardened and lengthened once again.

With a whimper, I kissed the head of his dick before taking it into my mouth and sucking. I was rewarded with a drop of his cum. I wasn't sure if it was precum or what was left after our earlier encounter, but I was growing addicted.

“Suck me down, Odette,” he bit out. “Take me deep.”

I tried, but his cock was thick and long. I felt my teeth scrape him and pulled back when he hissed.

“I'm sorry,” I said, looking up at him in alarm. I was fucking this up. The most beautiful experience of my life, and I was messing it up because I didn't know how to suck a cock this thick.

“Have you ever sucked a cock before?”

“Only once. But...” What was the etiquette here? “He wasn't nearly as thick. I hurt you.”

“No, baby. You didn't. Do what's comfortable if you want to continue. This isn't mandatory.”

“NO!” I gripped his hips, glaring up at him. “Mine!”

That got a bark of laughter from him. “Yeah, baby. It's definitely yours.”

I enclosed the head in my mouth again, sucking and licking the bulbous head, licking and swirling my tongue over and over. Cyrus let his head fall back and groaned. The muscles of his chest, arms, and shoulders bulged while the veins and tendons in his neck stood out in stark relief. I had

never seen anything sexier in my life. Why I hadn't waited for this man to come into my life before giving my virginity to another would forever haunt me. Cyrus had shown me more respect and pleasure than Steve ever had.

Trying to take him deeper, I forced him farther into my mouth until I felt him against my back teeth. It wasn't enough to gag me but was decidedly uncomfortable. My jaw ached, but I didn't want to stop. I wanted to make him lose control again. I wanted... to look into his eyes as he came down my throat and know it had been me to take him there.

I didn't have to wait long before sweat sheened over his skin and droplets fell from his face to mine. Looking up to his face, I willed him to look at me. To see *me* with my lips around his cock. In a desperate bid to get his attention, I dug my nails into his ass where I gripped and urged him to move.

“Fuck, Odette... *Fuck!*” His nostrils flared, and he bared his teeth at me. “Pull back — if you don't, my load will go down your throat. Pull back now!”

I didn't. Instead, I gripped him even tighter, keeping my eyes open, looking up at him while he fucked my face with shallow pumps of his hips. Seconds later he roared his release, never taking his gaze from me. Great ropes of cum spurted from his cock into my mouth. I swallowed as fast as I could, not wanting to miss a drop.

“Finger yourself, Odette! Come with me!”

Not doing what he asked wasn't even possible. One hand went to my clit and I stroked. Seconds later, I followed him, screaming around his softening cock as I sucked the last of his cum from him.

The next thing I knew, Cyrus was lifting me into his arms. He carried me to the bathroom, only setting me on my feet to start the shower. Still, he kept one arm around my back, clamping me against his body. Just as well. My legs were Jell-O.

He washed us both, seeming to take delight in simply touching my body. I couldn't deny I enjoyed the feel of his calloused, rough hands on my skin. We didn't talk. Honestly, I wasn't sure I could. For the first time since I found out Steve was essentially leading a double life, my mind was blessedly quiet.

"Sit on the shelf, baby." Cyrus urged me to where he wanted. When I sat, he knelt between my legs with a cloth. I started to close my legs reflexively, but he placed a hand on my knee, meeting my gaze steadily. I sighed and smiled, relaxing as he stroked my thigh. I nodded and he washed between my legs. It was an intensely intimate gesture, one I never expected from anyone.

He washed me carefully, touching me gently. When he finished, I expected he'd help me to my feet. Instead, he leaned in and kissed my mound before his tongue snaked out and lapped at my wet flesh.

"Cyrus! What are you doing?"

"Ain't you had this before?"

"NO!" I tried to push him away, but he was having none of it.

"Be still, baby. Let me taste you. Please."

Cyrus wasn't one to say please. As he'd put it before, he avoided the word *no* at all costs because he hated the word.

He could have continued on, and there was no way I'd have stopped him. It was just — the sensation was so foreign I wasn't sure what to do with it.

In a move that I never thought Cyrus would be capable of when he really wanted something, he didn't take what he wanted until I nodded my consent. He already knew he could have what he wanted from me. The way I'd behaved when we'd had sex was a hard clue. I wanted to take every part of him he wanted to give.

Once I nodded to him, he stroked my lips with his tongue gently, taking a tentative taste before flicking my clit lightly.

“Fucking delicious, Odette. Absolutely fucking delicious.” Then he tugged me to the edge of the shelf and buried his face between my thighs. It was just one more thing in a long list I'd been missing from sex. It was then I realized I'd never willingly go back to sex the way I'd had it with Steve. I deserved pleasure. I deserved to be treated the way Cyrus had treated me during our time together.

It didn't take long for him to push me up and over the edge of madness. I cried out a powerful orgasm that had my body seizing up and my back arching. My thighs clamped around his head as I ground my pussy against his lips, trying to ride out waves of pleasure on instinct.

When it was over, when I settled back to earth, I was as drained as I'd ever been. My mind was quiet. My body sated. I have no idea how Cyrus got me dried and into our bed, but the next thing I knew, he was turning out the light and pulling me against him. I rested my head on his chest and he kissed my forehead before stilling himself.

I was floating between sleep and wakefulness, breathing in the masculine, spicy scent that was all Cyrus. Before I realized I was going to say it, the words, “I love you,” slipped from my lips. Then I sighed and let sleep have me.

Chapter Eight

Odette

“Wake up, honey.” I stretched as Cyrus kissed and nuzzled me awake. There was a sliver of sunlight peeking through the curtains in his room but otherwise, I had no clue as to the time.

“Whassup?”

“We have company coming, honey. Your brother is on the way to meet us here.”

I stiffened. “Donovan? Why?”

“You knew I called him to let him know you were here. He’s concerned about you. Likely thinks he’s bringing you home.”

“But he has patients to see. Did you tell him we were together?”

Cyrus snorted. “If I had, I have no doubt the whole of Salvation’s Bane would be here instead of Blade alone. No. I thought it best to get you inked and wearing my property patch before I tell him. Still might cause a war between our clubs.”

I bit my lip. “I don’t want to cause you problems, Cyrus.”

“You ain’t, baby. Besides, once you’re inked, we’ll have the whole of Iron Tzars at our backs. Besides, it might take some convincing, but I don’t think your brother will kill me too much.”

I blinked. “Did you... Did you just make a joke?”

He was silent, looking at me with a blank expression for several seconds. Then he grinned. We both chuckled.

After stretching and protesting appropriately, I walked naked to the bathroom. Soon after that, I found myself facing the vanity while Cyrus railed me from behind. As always, I loved watching the intensity of his expressions. Cyrus might not be able to relate to emotions or understand exactly what he was feeling, but they were there. And, by the look of his face while he did it, the man loved fucking me. I was good with that.

After our morning delight, we met Ace in his shop. The man was covered in all kinds of artistic ink, even up the sides of his neck and into his hair. There were instruments and ink laid out neatly on a table beside the lounge chair, along with a few sketches he’d made in anticipation of our arrival.

“Wylde said this was a rush job,” he said to Cyrus with a grin. “You expecting trouble?”

Cyrus shrugged. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

I rolled my eyes. “My brother is on his way. Cyrus thought it best to get this done before he tries to take me back to Florida.”

“Should I be concerned? ‘Cause I have no desire to be collateral damage if he doesn’t accept his sister being old lady to this asshole.”

Cyrus took a threatening step toward Ace, but I twined my fingers through his. “My brother only wants me happy, Ace. He’s not going to hurt anyone if I’m happy.”

The man glanced from me to Cyrus. “Just out of curiosity, who’s your brother? Anyone I know?”

“Donovan Muse,” I said with a smile.

Ace actually took a couple steps back. “Wait. Donovan Muse. *The* Donovan Muse. Blade. From Salvation’s Bane.”

I frowned. “That a problem?”

“Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me? His name’s Blade, for Christ’s sake! I wasn’t there, but I heard a guy tell the story of how he got his road name. I have no desire to be the one to give his sister a property tattoo without his knowledge.”

“You can be afraid of a man who’s not here, or a man who is. Me.” Cyrus had a thunderous look on his face. Like he was ready to do murder. It was as alarming as it was charming, in a crazy kind of way. Cyrus saw this as the last barrier keeping me from him. All he had to do was make it happen and I was his.

“I’m afraid of that girl’s brother. Ain’t too proud to admit it. Isn’t she his baby sister? Cause she don’t look old enough to be anything but. She even legal?”

“I’m eighteen.” I glanced at Cyrus, unsure of the protocol. “Do you need my driver’s license?”

“No. Don’t need your license.” Ace grumbled, scrubbing his hand down his face. “I’m not sure about this, Cyrus. Blade know you’re with his sister?”

“He will. When he gets here and sees her ink. Now. You gonna do this the easy way or the hard way?”

Ace and Cyrus stared at each other a long time before Ace backed down. “Fine, you bastard. But this is all on you.

I'm not taking responsibility for any of it."

"Good."

We started going over designs and I chose one he'd designed with a colorful hummingbird holding a red heart dangling from a thread. Above it in elegant script were the words, "Property of" and below it woven into the branch the bird was perched on "Cyrus."

"It's so lovely," I said, my fingers lightly grazing the design. "But I have a question before we begin."

"Ask anything you like. I want you sure and confident of everything before we start."

"I'm close to seven weeks pregnant. It's safe to do this. Right?"

I looked at Cyrus, who looked startled, then to Ace who was shaking his head with a look of utter relief on his face.

"Thank fuckin' God! No. It's not exactly dangerous, especially here, but I'm sure the Surgeon General recommends against it." He gave Cyrus a triumphant look.

"I'll get Stitches' opinion. I don't want to put the baby at risk, but I really want this done."

"I'll do whatever you think is best, Cyrus. You've earned my trust." It surprised me how true those words were. I did trust Cyrus to make decisions like this for me. I knew that, if there was any danger and he chose to go ahead with this, the benefits of having his ink on me outweighed the risks. And it would have to be a huge gap.

He fired off a text to Stitches. It wasn't long before he

got a reply. He must not have liked what he read because his scowl deepened. “Mother fuck. Can nothing go right today?” His complaint was muttered as he scrubbed a hand behind his neck. “I need an alternative, Ace.”

“What about henna? It’s not permanent and would have to be touched up at least once a week until we can get her inked. There won’t be much color other than a reddish brown, but it could mark her until it’s safe.”

Cyrus looked at me. “What do you think?”

“I’ll do whatever you want me to, Cyrus. I know you won’t lead me wrong.”

He shot off another text, looking a little more settled after my words. Seconds later, he got a reply.

“Stitches says the henna is safe. I’ll have to talk to Sting and Brick about it. See what they recommend since we can’t get you inked properly. I’ll present this as our alternative.”

“I’m sure he’ll have to put it to a club vote,” Ace said. “Shoulda been done a while ago, but we never considered there’d be a need.” He shook his head. “I’ll do the henna, Cyrus, but not the real tatt until after she delivers.”

“Not perfect, but it’s the only option we’ve got. I won’t put the baby at risk.”

I sucked in a breath. “Like I did.” My voice was soft and guilt rode me once again. I’d struggled with it since the day I’d woke up so sick after my night of feeling sorry for myself.

“Honey, it was one time. And you only suspected you

were pregnant. Given the circumstances, I think you needed a break from reality. We're taking care of you and the baby now. Everything will be fine."

"I hope so."

Cyrus squeezed my hand and smiled. "Worry about how to keep yourself healthy from this point forward, lil' bit. We'll worry about anything else if it becomes an issue."

The next couple of hours was done in subdued silence. Ace spoke softly when he had questions while Cyrus stood next to me, holding my hand while Ace worked. He did a single-color variation of my hummingbird. The design was the same, though. Once he'd finished with me, he worked on Cyrus. His tattoo was my name in the same elegant script inked around his ring finger. Cyrus had him add "Beloved Mate" along the inner side of his finger. Naturally, that set off a bout of crying on my part.

"Stupid hormones," I sniffed before Cyrus dried my tears and gave me a tissue to blow my nose.

He kissed me gently. "Lean on me, Odette. Cry if you need to. I'll keep you safe."

"I know you will." I gave him a watery smile. Then we left Ace's place and went to see Sting.

"We'll have to discuss it in church, but what alternative do we have? It's just bad timing, and we'd never insist either of you willingly put the baby at risk. Not unless it's life or death. This can wait. The temporary tattoo will do for the short term." He shrugged. "It might be necessary to restrict her movements within the club without an escort until she's fully inked, but as long as you're with her, Cyrus, everything will be

fine.”

“She’s not going to be more loyal after she’s inked than she is now. But rules are rules.”

“Once we discuss it in church, I’m sure we’ll come up with a reasonable plan for her to exist with us inside the compound as an old lady to you.”

“Seems like all I do is cause problems.”

“You’re not a problem, Odette,” Cyrus assured. “We’re in uncharted territory. At worst, you’ll be confined to the areas the other families are unless you have an escort. No one’s going to consider you a problem.”

“We’re having to adapt is all,” Sting offered. “We’ve been doing it a lot in the last few months. Not the first time. I’m sure it won’t be the last.”

While we sat in the common room chatting, the door opened and my brother strolled in, his gaze darting around the room. When he found me, he let out a harsh breath.

“Odette. Thank God you’re safe.” He hurried to me, pulling me into his embrace when I stood. “Why’d you take off? You had me worried sick.”

“There’s been some things going on in my life I didn’t tell you about. Everything kind of came to a head, and I just needed to get away.”

“All the way from Palm Beach to Evansville? Honey, that’s a thousand miles! What happened that you ran a thousand miles away?”

I glanced at Cyrus who was standing by my side. I was so nervous I thought I might throw up. Knowing my brother

was on the way and him standing in front of me were two entirely different things. My brother loved me with everything he was. He'd taken care of me when our parents had died and had done it gladly. He'd never made me feel like I was in the way or a responsibility he didn't want. He'd loved me and given me everything he could emotionally as well as materially.

Taking a shaking breath, I blurted it out. "Donovan, I'm pregnant." I gripped Cyrus's hand as hard as I could, terrified of my brother's reaction. What I got wasn't what I was expecting.

Donovan jerked like I'd struck him, then blinked rapidly. He glanced down at mine and Cyrus's laced fingers then to me. Then to Cyrus. Before I knew what was happening, Donovan lunged at Cyrus and landed a haymaker across his jaw.

"You son of a bitch!"

"Donovan! Stop!"

"You better do the right thing and take care of her if she's carryin' your kid, you bastard. You don't? You'll find out why they call me Blade."

Cyrus had let go of my hand right before Donovan landed his punch. He staggered backward two steps from the impact but stayed on his feet.

"Donovan! It wasn't Cyrus! He's been nothing but good to me since I got here! Please stop!"

I thrust myself between Donovan and Cyrus, putting my hands on my brother's chest to hold him back. He glanced down at me, then did a double take. Then his gaze locked on to

the henna tattoo on my right inner forearm. If anything, the sight enraged him more. He snatched my wrist and turned my arm so he could examine it.

“That’s not a real tattoo.”

“No,” I said. “It’s henna. Stitches said it wasn’t safe for me to get the real one until after I have the baby.”

“This is a property patch, Odette. Do you know what that means?” Donovan was angry as hell, that was obvious. He tried to calm himself when talking to me, but it was easy to see he was losing what little patience he had left.

“Yes. I know.”

“And you’re good with being Cyrus’s woman? His old lady?”

“Yes, Donovan. I am.”

Donovan turned his gaze on Cyrus. “I don’t like this, Odette. I think you should come back with me to Palm Springs and let me take care of you. We’ll find a man in Bane to be your protector. Someone I trust.”

Cyrus stepped closer to me and gently pulled me away from my brother and urged me to the side. “She’s mine, Blade. I think she has been since the night I carried her to you after that prospect snuck her in the Bane compound. I just didn’t realize it.”

“What if I tell you I forbid this? You going to go against me and marry my sister anyway? What if I told you you’re not nearly good enough for her?”

Cyrus looked confused. He glanced at me before speaking slowly, like he was trying to choose his words

carefully. “You’re OK with me banging your baby sister without making her my wife?”

I groaned at the same time Blade struck out again. This time, he launched himself at Cyrus. The two men tussled on the floor, each struggling to get the upper hand. Cyrus gave as good as he got but didn’t seem out for blood. Donovan, on the other hand, was doing everything he could to hurt Cyrus. I had no doubt that, had Cyrus been less of a fighter, Donovan would have seriously hurt him. But, honestly, what did Cyrus expect when he phrased that question the way he had? What the hell was he thinking? He was asking for the beating he was currently getting.

“You fucking bastard! I’m gonna kill you, you sumbitch!”

“I told you,” Cyrus grunted. “She’s mine.” Another grunt. “What did you think I meant?”

“She’s gonna be your old lady, Cyrus. You’re gonna be faithful.” Punch. Grunt. “You’re gonna take care of her.” More grunting. “And you’re Goddamned well gonna marry her and give her, as well as this baby, your name! You don’t, you’ll answer to me, Goddamnit!” Donovan had his arm over Cyrus’s throat, bearing down with all his weight. Why Cyrus wasn’t fighting back was anyone’s guess. Looking at him while my brother was trying to beat the shit out of him, there was no sign Cyrus thought he was in a fight for his life. Sure, he looked like he was exerting himself, but there was no fear or concern about him whatsoever.

“So, you’re saying,” Cyrus gasped out, “I have your permission,” another gasp, “to marry your sister?”

“No! I’m sayin’ you *better* fuckin’ marry her if you

know what's fuckin' good for you!"

The second the words were out of Donovan's mouth, he froze, a look of horror on his face. It took me a second, but I realized what Cyrus had just done. He'd played my brother perfectly. The superior grin on Cyrus's face said it had all gone according to plan.

Donovan collapsed back on his ass on the floor, then started chuckling. "You son of a fuckin' bitch. Fuck."

"Makin' new friends, Cyrus?" Wylde popped his head out of his office, a wide grin on his face. "This is just one of many reasons I'm glad I brought you to that bar the other week." He waved his hand in Donovan's general direction. "You need friends in your life, man. I made it my mission to see to it you had all kinds of friends."

"You're one step away from getting your Fortnite account deleted, Wylde," Sting threatened.

Wylde's shit-eating grin faded to one of utter sadness. Like he was a kid with a new toy a mean adult had decided he couldn't have. Too bad he spoiled the effect by winking at me.

"Fixin' to put that eye out, Wylde." Cyrus's threat was casual. He might have been talking about the weather while he sat in the floor on his ass. He wiggled his jaw from side to side where my brother had connected more than once.

"Man. You guys are takin' away all my fun today." Wylde leaned against the door frame to his office and blew a bubble with the gum he chewed. Then he grinned again, obviously not intimidated in any way.

Cyrus got to his feet and reached down a hand to my brother. Donovan looked at it for several seconds before taking

it and letting Cyrus help him to his feet.

“Gonna have to keep an eye on that one, Odette. He’s slippery.”

I grinned. “He is. But he’s wonderful, Donovan. He’s been really good to me.”

“I take it you’re learning how he works? He’s a little difficult to take sometimes.”

“We’ve had some bumps in the road, but I know he cares for me.”

Donovan’s features hardened again as he snapped his gaze to Cyrus. “You *care* for her.”

Cyrus didn’t flinch. “I do. Very much.”

“Do you love her?” Donovan raised an eyebrow. I could see the anger simmering beneath the surface of his civility. He’d calmed down, but the potential for this to go back to blows was still there.

There was a long silence. Cyrus’s face was a hard mask now as he looked at my brother. Now, it was Cyrus who was angry. But why?

“You know I don’t deal well with emotions, Blade. You were the one who helped me figure out why my moods were so erratic and anything out of my routine fucked with my head. I could tell you I love her, but I’m not certain I actually know what love is.” He shook his head, that first gesture I noticed from him when he was unsure of himself. Like he was having an internal argument and not altogether sure he was winning. “What is love, Blade? You ask me if I love her, but what is it? I’ve heard people say they love ice cream, or steak. Is that the

same as loving a person?”

“You know it’s not, Cyrus,” Donovan snapped. “Don’t fuck with me on this. Do. You. Love. Odette.”

Cyrus turned to me. “Odette, I never want to lie to you. Not about anything.”

I smiled at him. “You don’t have to explain yourself, Cyrus. You show me your feelings with the way you take care of me. You may not get it, but I do. I’d much rather feel your love for me than have you say it.”

That must have been the exact right thing to say. Cyrus visibly relaxed, then pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly.

“Not lettin’ you go, lil’ bit. Not ever.”

“I’m not letting you go either.”

“Uh, in case anyone wants to know...” Wylde waved his hand to get our attention. He was still blowing bubbles while he leaned against the door frame. “One Steve Gleeson is on his way here.”

“What?” My stomach dropped.

“Yeah. You know the dude’s loaded? I extended an invite to see the sights of Evansville, but he declined. Unfortunately, when his limo picked him up at his side piece’s house, Clutch was driving. He wasn’t too keen on sightseeing on the way here from West Palm Beach. Clutch said he preferred to ride in the trunk where he didn’t have to look out the windows.”

Chapter Nine

Cyrus

Iron Tzars owned several properties in and around the Evansville area. Or rather, there were properties owned by people who only existed on paper. Wylde was a genius with shit like that. Nothing could be traced back to the club or any of her members or anyone we associated with. Shit happened on those properties sometimes. Several people we'd had to deal with in the barn had ended up there. Usually in a sinkhole or in pieces next to a pig farm where the bodies would never be found. 'Cause they were eaten. You know. By the pigs. Clutch took the esteemed Mr. Gleeson and his fancy-ass limo to one such property. What happened next would depend entirely on that bastard Gleeson.

We pulled up to the copse of trees where Clutch had driven the limo. The road leading to the property was private for several miles in one of the most rural areas of the state. Even though it was nearly impossible anyone saw us drive into the area, none of us were on our bikes. Instead, I drove myself, Odette, and Blade in an old Bronco while Brick and Wylde led the way in an equally old F-150.

"I still may have to kill you, Cyrus," Blade said conversationally. "I'm pretty sure it's in the big brother code of conduct."

"You won't." I wanted to smirk but refrained. I'd gotten one over on Blade and the other man was stewing. He'd get over it. Especially if I could prove to him I could keep

Odette happy.

“Don’t bet your life on it.”

“Is that supposed to be a pun, Blade? ‘Cause it’s a really shitty one.” That shut the bastard up, though I saw him rolling his eyes when I glanced in the rearview mirror.

We all exited the vehicles and stood behind the limo. Odette clung to me, her slight body trembling.

“I don’t want to do this,” she whispered. “To see Steve.”

“I’ll take you back to the Bronco.” I’d started to urge her back when Clutch popped the trunk. A bound and gagged Gleeson grunted furiously, kicking out with his bound legs and thrashing so hard he fell from the trunk to the ground with a bone-jarring thud.

“Bet that hurt.” Wylde grinned as he approached the man with Clutch and helped him to his feet, then untied him and removed his gag.

He was wet with sweat, his sparse hair stuck to his scalp. What was probably an immaculate shirt at one time was soaked through. He sat on the edge of the trunk, taking in great gulps of air.

Gleeson looked around until he spotted Odette. His eyes widened then his features turned furious.

“I should have known you were behind this, you little whore!”

“Whooo!” Wylde, the bastard, looked positively gleeful. “You might wanna rethink the ‘tude, bro. These are the people who brought you a thousand miles across the

country and no one's the wiser. Though, if you want to continue, by all means! Personally, I hope you choose option number two. They don't let me out much and I'd really like some action."

I felt Odette relax against me. She took a deep breath and turned to face Gleeson. "I had nothing to do with this, Steve."

"No? Why'd you show up at the theater when my wife and kids were with me? It's not like Martha would ever believe you. She never does when bitches come for my money."

"Everything's not about you, Steve. I was there to see a movie I'd been looking forward to for months. If you were so worried about getting caught, perhaps you shouldn't tell women you're cheating with that your wife's dead when she's perfectly healthy." Odette seemed to have found her calm, but a fine shiver still ran through her more than once as she stood next to me. Her hand still bunched in my shirt and she moved closer to me. I put my arm around her and held her close. Fuck this guy anyway.

"That your new fling? He know how you tried to screw me out of a whole pile of money?"

"I never asked you for anything. Not in the two months I thought things were good between us and not when I figured out I was the other woman. I never once took money from you."

"Did she give you the song and dance how she was a virgin?" He was talking to me now. I stood by passively when I really wanted to put a bullet in his Goddamned head. "Have you fucked her yet? Because, let me tell you, if you haven't,

it's not really worth the trouble. A real cold fish, that one." He chuckled.

"This just gets better and better." Wylde grinned. This time, he had an apple. He took a bite. "Keep goin', Stevie boy. Give 'em what for."

"Wylde, you're on thin ice," Brick said casually. "Don't instigate things."

The bastard actually managed to look innocent. "Me? Instigate? I'd never do such a thing! I'm merely wantin' to see the man who hurt our little Odette pay. If a little blood is spilled, I'm not gonna lose sleep."

Gleeson grinned. But he wasn't looking at Odette. He was looking at me. "I bet she tried to get you to fuck her without a condom, too. She did me. Fortunately, I was smarter than that. Bitch was wanting to get pregnant with my child because she thought I'd have to pay child support. The joke's on her, though. I had a vasectomy." He chuckled. "I still fucked her bare, though. Who am I to disappoint my favorite whore?"

With every word he spoke, Odette jerked like he'd punched her. She shook her head, like she was denying what he said. I wasn't sure which part she didn't like, but I didn't like any of it.

"You rich?" Wylde continued eating his apple.

Gleeson smirked. "Exceedingly."

"Bet you didn't make all that money yourself, though." The smirk on Wylde's face was the look that always made me want to punch him in the balls. When Gleeson's face turned even redder and he looked like he was going to tear Wylde

apart with his bare hands, I could relate. The man could seriously get under your skin if you let him. “I only say that because only a dumbshit would provoke that man.” He shrugged. “Or any man his size with that exact expression on his face. Looks like he could rip you limb from limb and sleep like a baby tonight.”

Brick sighed. “Just so you guys know, it was Sting’s idea I bring Wylde. I voted to leave him home.”

Clutch snorted. “Now where would be the fun in that?”

“I gotta admit,” Blade added. “He certainly makes life more interesting.”

“I aim to please.”

“You’re all going to jail for this! My car has a GPS system in it. My security team will be on us in no time.”

Wylde looked confused. “GPS?” He looked at Clutch. “You stole a car with a fancy-shmancy GPS system?”

Clutch just shrugged. “What can I say? The car looked sweet and I thought it was worth the risk.”

“Fucker really is a dumbshit.” Surprisingly, that muttered comment came from Blade. “But wait. I suppose that’s not a fair assessment since he has no idea who he’s dealing with.” Blade saluted the guy. “Good luck, pal.”

“I don’t need luck. I have technology on my side.”

“Really.” Blade stepped toward Gleeson, advancing on him slowly. “If that’s true, why do you suppose no one’s here not to rescue you? Had you planned on coming a thousand miles north today?”

For the first time, Gleeson looked unsure. He looked

around him like he expected his men to suddenly appear. “What do you mean? They’ll come for me.”

“They had over fourteen hours to find and follow you. Since you’re such an important man, I’m certain they tried to contact you in all that time. They have to know you’re missing. Right?”

“They do,” he said confidently. “I know they do. I also know they’re tracking my limo.”

“Well, they would be,” Wylde interrupted, “if, you know, I hadn’t disabled your entire security network, including the GPS in your car, your phone, your watch, and every other gizmo and gadget you own. In fact, I happen to know your deputy head of security is currently wondering what the fuck happened to you. Your wife, however, could give two shits. Why? ‘Cause she’s bangin’ your chief head of security.”

The man looked like his head was about to explode. If steam could come out of someone’s ears, Gleeson would look like a cartoon character. I also had no doubt he’d try to kill Wylde if he could get his hands on him. Unfortunately for Gleeson, Wylde might be a dipshit goofball sometimes, but he was also deadly when he had to be.

“You’ll never —”

“Yeah, get away with this. I know.” Wylde said with a flip of his wrist. “Heard that at least a dozen times this month. The fact is, it’s you who ain’t gettin’ away with anything.” Wylde picked up a manila envelope from the passenger seat of the truck he and Brick rode in. Pulling out a stack of papers, he waved them in front of Gleeson’s face. “See this? It’s custody papers. You’re gonna sign away your rights.”

“My rights to what? You’re not getting my children, you bastard!”

“Actually, we are. Or, rather, Odette and Cyrus are. She’s carrying your baby, and you’re not going to protest when Cyrus adopts the child.”

Gleeson actually laughed. “Didn’t you hear what I said? I had a vasectomy. I can’t have kids. The bitch might be pregnant, but it’s not mine. And I’m not paying for any bastard child she has.”

“Never asked you to,” Wylde said with a grin. “One thing you really should have paid attention to when you had that little procedure. Takes at least ten weeks for it to take. Sometimes as long as twelve weeks or more.” Wylde asked his next question in a stage whisper. “When’d you get clipped, Stevie boy?”

The man stood there with his mouth open, unable to say a word. Then he shook his head. “No. Not possible.”

“Oh, it’s not only possible, it’s accurate. I had a friend in a lab in a galaxy far, far away do some testing. We got your DNA from... places. Once the baby’s far enough along, we could do a paternity test.”

I shook my head. “Not necessary. I believe Odette when she says you’re the sperm donor. But it doesn’t matter anyway, ‘cause you’re gonna sign the document Wylde has there whether or not you’re the father. That way there are no mistakes.”

“Jesus,” Wylde muttered as he handed Gleeson a pen. “How can someone so stupid have made so much Goddamned money?” Then he brightened. “Oh, wait! I know the answer to

this one! He didn't! It's his wife's money! He just pretends it's his to coax young, vulnerable women to his bed. Then he takes what he wants from them and throws them out like trash. Isn't that right, Stevie boy?" Though Wylde's expression was bright, I could actually see the underlying anger in him. Maybe I was getting better at this whole emotional bullshit.

"Sign the fuckin' papers, Stevie," Brick growled. "I want to get the fuck outa here sometime this century."

"You have to know I'm going to turn you all in to the police when I get out of here, right?"

"And you said I was the dipshit." Wylde shook his head. "Hint. When you've been kidnapped by badasses and taken to one of the most remote areas of a backwater place like Indiana, you don't threaten to turn your captors in to the police when they let you go." He shook his head again, still chuckling. "No wonder your wife's bangin' your security chief. He's gotta be more intelligent than you." He tilted his head, still looking at Gleeson. "Did you ever even find her clit, Stevie boy?"

Gleeson's tirade got cut short before it even started when Brick one-punched him in the head. The man dropped like a stone.

"Brick," Wylde sighed, sounding for all the world like a disappointed parent. "We didn't get the papers signed. You were supposed to wait until he signed the papers."

"Yeah, well, I'd had enough of his blustering and shit. It's not like we care anyway. This was about revenge for our sweet girl, Odette."

"Oh, I got that for her." Wylde's grin was positively

gleeful. “In spades. In fact, I’d be willing to bet my left testicle old Stevie boy there would rather get punched in the head again than go through what he’s getting ready to go through.”

“What did you do?” Odette turned her head where she’d buried it in my chest, and I wanted to growl at Wylde. I wanted her taking comfort in me. Not curious about what Wylde had in store for this bastard.

“He’s going to lose everything he has, Odette. Everything. I drained every single bank account he has that’s not associated with his wife or kids. He’d been siphoning his wife’s money since they got married, so she’s not gonna be happy to learn about that. He’d managed to get his name on all but his wife’s corporate account for her very successful accounting firm. The house, the cars, their summer home in the Hamptons, all of it, I reverted back to her. As of this afternoon — which is why we moved now — he doesn’t have a penny to his name.”

Odette gasped. “Are you serious?”

“Oh, very.” Wylde sobered now. “Not only that, but I contacted his wife a week ago. She and I had a nice little chat. Which is the reason she’s banging the security chief. I gave her a divorce. The appropriate paperwork is done, the computer shit is filed. She wanted to go back to her maiden name, so I fixed that too. Woman’s sharp. She knew there were things that didn’t add up, but she didn’t want to rock the boat. We compared notes, and she acknowledged what she already knew. Her husband is a lying, cheating bastard who damn near took everything she had.”

“Will she be all right?”

“Odette,” I sighed. “You’re too compassionate for your

own good. That woman will be fine.” I didn’t want her anymore upset than she already was. I know seeing Gleeson had thrown her. She’d tried to be brave and face him with her chin up, but everything he’d said about her had really shaken her self-confidence.

“No, Cyrus. I think she’s even more of a victim than I am. What about her children, Wylde? Won’t he try to get custody in order to get child support if she’s the breadwinner in the family?”

“Nope. Kids ain’t his. She had them from her first marriage. A good man from all accounts. Died in the service a year before she met Stevie boy. The kids are safe and she’s rid of that loser. Besides all that, she filed charges against him. There are warrants out for his arrest for all kinds of shit including money laundering and tax evasion. We got everyone involved we could think of. I have protections in place to keep her from being collateral damage and to protect her business, but even if this bastard tries to go after her for money or us for this, he’s in so much trouble it will look like he’s trying to deflect blame. Besides, we all have airtight alibis and, as you said, she’s the victim in his little schemes. No one’s going to believe a word he says, *and* when it’s all said and done, he’s going away for a very fuckin’ long time.”

“I bet she hates me, and I don’t blame her.”

“No, honey.” Wylde spoke kindly to Odette. Like he knew how fragile she was. I wanted to yank out every single strand of bright green hair in the ridiculous streak on his head one hair at a time. Just to fuck with him. Because he understood Odette’s feelings and concerns, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to. “She knows he duped you just like he did

her. She's a really nice woman, actually."

"We done here?" I needed to get back to the clubhouse with Odette. I needed to make love to her. It was the only way I knew how to express how much she meant to me. To tell her what she needed to hear that I wasn't sure I could ever say and know in my heart the words were true.

"Yep." Brick and Clutch put Gleeson in the back seat of the limo. "I'll take this asswipe outa here and drop him and the limo off across the river. He can go wherever he wants from there."

"We're heading back," I told Brick. "Got shit to do. Take Blade with you, will ya?"

"Oh, no." Blade took Odette's arm and gently extracted her from my arms. I wanted to protest, but I recognized now wasn't the best time. Odette looked shell-shocked and fighting over her like two dogs with a bone would only distress her more. "I'm going with you. Me and Odette need to talk, and now's the perfect time."

"Don't you think she needs time to process all this or some shit?" On some level I knew that wasn't the right thing to say, but it slipped out before I could stop it. "You can talk to her tomorrow."

"Nope. I think now's the perfect time." He led Odette to the Bronco and helped her inside. I clenched my teeth and flipped Wylde off when he cackled like a fucking loon.

Turned out, Blade was on my side. He spoke quietly with Odette all the way back to the compound. Yes, she was feeling more than a little fragile, but she kept looking at me any time Blade would ask her a question. They were in the

back seat, but she'd meet my gaze in the rearview mirror anytime she was unsure of herself. She already relied on me to help when she needed it. That knowledge made my chest swell with pride.

When we were back at the compound, Blade reached out a hand to me. "You keep taking good care of my sister, Cyrus. Don't know what she sees in you, but I'm convinced she loves you." I took his hand and gave it a firm shake.

"I..." I cleared my throat. "She's a good woman."

Blade, the bastard actually grinned. I suppose if there was another man on earth who got me, it was Blade. "I hear ya." Thing was, he probably did.

I took Odette to my room and stripped her bare before getting undressed myself. We lay down in the bed together, and I pulled her to me so her head rested on my shoulder and my arms were securely around her. She didn't cry but I thought she might be holding it all in.

"You can, you know, tell me your feelings or whatever you need to do right now."

"I don't really know what I'm feeling." Her voice was soft and a little mournful, wrapping around my heart and squeezing uncomfortably.

"That's supposed to be my line." As I hoped, that got a small smile from her. But it wasn't nearly enough.

I let the silence stretch on for a while before I asked my next question. "Did you love him, Odette? Does it bother you to know what's about to happen to him?"

"No. Not at all. Either of those things. I thought I

wanted him, but I think I knew from the first time we were intimate he wasn't going to be the man for me. It still hurt when I discovered his secret, but had I not realized I might be pregnant, it would have been a relief. I had a way out without confrontation on my part. I mean, finding out your boyfriend has a wife and kids is confrontation enough."

"True." Then I asked the question that was burning inside me. The question I dreaded asking because it put me in a position to hear the word I hated most in the world. This time, hearing it might tear a hole in me big enough to drive a semi through. "What about me? You're still not leaving me, but do you love me?" She'd said it once but had been exhausted and probably half asleep when she had. I needed to know even if I couldn't give her an answer to the same question.

She stilled, then looked up at me. There was a beautiful, soft smile on her face. "Yeah, Cyrus. I love you. More than I ever thought it possible to love someone. Especially in such a short time." She settled back but didn't stop talking. "I had you built up into a fantasy no one could ever live up to. For two years I thought about you and how I wanted my life to be with you."

Just like that, my world crumbled. She might love me, but it was likely I'd never measure up to what she wanted. "I'll be what you need, Odette. I swear I'll figure it out."

"That's the thing, Cyrus. You surpassed everything I thought I ever wanted. Sure, you're abrupt and gruff, but you're one of the best people I know. And you take care of me. You give me what I need."

The band tightening around my chest eased and I found

myself shaking with relief. Of course, Odette noticed and frowned up at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing! I...” God! Feelings should be outlawed. They were confusing and messy and... “I love you.”

There was silence while Odette blinked up at me, surprise on her lovely face. Then a slow smile graced her features, and I completely lost my heart in that very instant.

“I love you, too, Cyrus.”

I cleared my throat. “Good. I’m glad we got that settled.”

She laid her head back on my chest. Then I felt her tremble. It took me several seconds to realize she was trying to hold in a giggle.

“Really, Odette?” I rolled my eyes, though the relief inside me was tremendous. “I tell you something I’ve never told anyone else in the entire world and you’re giggling?”

“I can’t help it!” She finally gave up all pretense of trying to hide her laughter and crawled on top of me, straddling my hips and pressing her bare pussy against my rapidly hardening cock. “It’s like it took the demons of hell to drag that out of you. It’s just three little words.” She leaned in and kissed me gently even as she continued to smile.

“Yeah, well, it’s three words I’ve never said because I wasn’t sure I ever meant them. I know now I do. But only with you.”

She reached between us and guided my cock inside her. “I’m glad that you found the words, Cyrus. But I’m partial

to action. Why don't you show me how much you love me."

"Oh, baby. Don't say you didn't ask for this." I gave her a cocky grin, my heart swelling with all the love I felt for this woman.

Then I proceeded to show her. For the rest of the day, and into the night. And it... was... *glorious!*

[Marteeka Karland](#)

Erotic romance author by night, emergency room tech/clerk by day, Marteeka Karland works really hard to drive everyone in her life completely and totally nuts. She has been creating stories from her warped imagination since she was in the third grade. Her love of writing blossomed throughout her teenage years until it developed into the totally unorthodox and irreverent style her English teachers tried so hard to rid her of.

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